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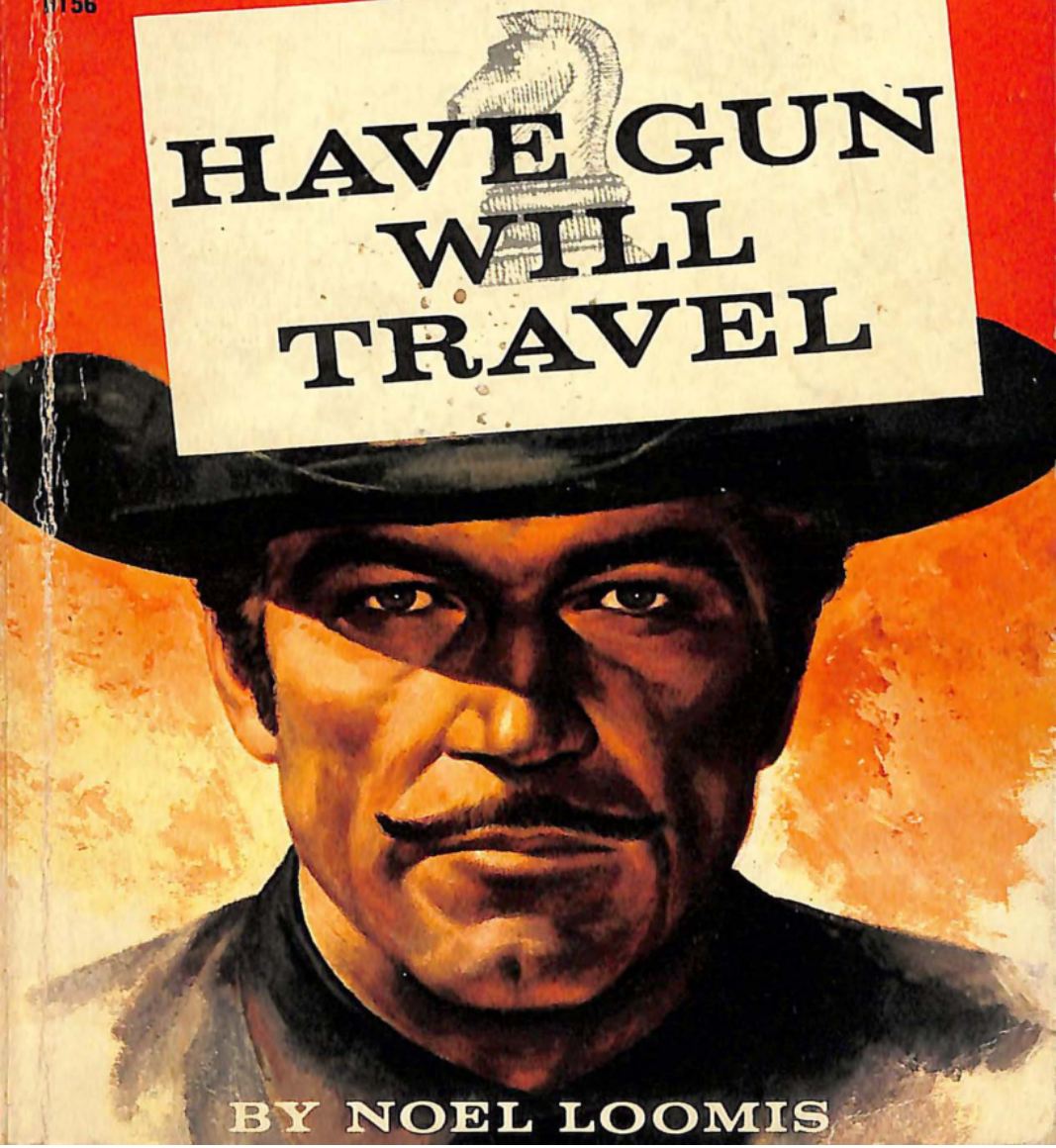
FIRST EDITION

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HAVE GUN WILL TRAVEL



BY NOEL LOOMIS

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A daring character . . .

Paladin . . .

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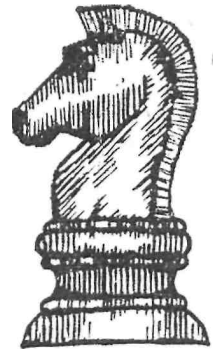
With a talent for trouble he has a taste for luxury as well, enjoying the regal, cultured life of sophisticated San Francisco society.

Just call him anytime—the card reads:

Have Gun, Will Travel

WIRE PALADIN
SAN FRANCISCO

an original Western



Have Gun, Will Travel

Noel Loomis

A Dell First Edition

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1

There was gold in San Francisco in the late 1860's. Gold and men. Men to work for it, to fight for it, to steal for it, to kill for it. There was whisky to make a man drunk so he could forget, and there was faro, which, like all rainbows, . never delivered the fortune it promised. But always, when there was gold, there was a woman, either at a man's elbow or envisioned in his mind, to help him spend it—or even to help him get it, by work, by swindle, by cards, by robbery, or by murder.

In this wild, wicked city on the bay, the mornings were cool as the fog blanketed the hills and human sounds were quiet and subdued; the afternoons were sunny, and the city came awake, and the sound of human voices arose as the fog rolled back down the precipitous streets; then the city was taken over by the nights that never seemed to end. For in the mud of the hilly streets, in the yellow gaslight of the saloons, in the plush and elegant parlors of the love palaces, there was spawned a violence that lives yet today in the littered and windswept streets, in the sharp and suspicious glances toward a stranger, in the dark feelings that flow over a man when he passes a narrow alley, in the strident clang of the cable cars as they hurtle down Powell Street to the turn-around.

The violence, however, came into existence long before the day of cable cars, and its intensity surged anew after , the Civil War, when the hard passions of four years of bitter fighting went west to be brewed in the gold-lined cauldron of San Francisco, to spew out duels and murders and hangings. A cauldron of black violence, where a man's neck was as safe as his strong right arm could make it. For San Francisco was crowded with foreigners—prostitutes and pimps from Paris and from Chile, pickpockets from London, thugs from Prussia, ex-convicts from Australia, knife-fighters from Sicily, garroting experts from Macao— criminals from all over the United States, and a few men intrepid enough to try to make a living by honest efforts.

One such was Paladin, whose headquarters was at the Hotel Carlton. And on a noisy night in May, 1868, Paladin, in his palatial suite at the Hotel Carlton, sat easily with a glass of Napoleon brandy and perused the latest issue of the *Aha California.* He inhaled the brandy, sipped it slowly, and then looked up as Heyboy, the hotel's Chinese valet, came into the room in padded slippers. Paladin saw him only absently, and Heyboy stood waiting, his arms

folded in his voluminous sleeves.

"Here's an item," Paladin said, and read aloud:

" 'Mrs. Joe Marsh offers $ 1,000 reward for information on the whereabouts of her husband, crusading editor of the Santa Fe (New Mexico) *Citizen.* California papers please copy.' "

"I've heard of crusading editors being shot," Paladin observed, "but disappearance . . ."

Finally he looked up at Heyboy, who said promptly in his singsong Cantonese, "You have company, sir. Missy Armen—Armendariz—" He struggled over the unfamiliar sounds. "She is famous actress, and she is—ooh!" He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"Like a ripe watermelon?" suggested Paladin, amused.

"Velly lipe. Nice. Gorgeous!" he said explosively.

"From where?"

"She arrive' on mail schooner, with five others in show troupe—two men, three women—on mail packet from Acapulco, yesterday. Name of ship is . . . is . . ."

"The *Dusenberg,"* suggested Paladin.

Heyboy, nodding rapidly, smiled.

"What is her business here with me?"

Heyboy looked pensive. "She does not say. I suppose, like other women, she has heard boss is tall and handsome and spends lot of money. You think?"

"No, I don't think." Paladin looked absently at the newspaper. Then he bent over sharply. "From the New York Semi-Weekly *Tribune,"* he read. " 'Advices received from Washington are to the effect that the United States attorney general has sent a U.S. marshal to investigate a complaint by the Mexican government that revolutionaries in Northern Mexico (in the states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua) are using Santa Fe, in the Territory of New Mexico, as a headquarters to run U.S. rifles to Mexico. This practice is strictly against the law and a violation of U.S.-Mexican treaties: therefore it must be stopped, or there is possible trouble afoot between the two nations. It is said a beautiful actress from the Boston stage acts as go-between for dealers in New England, and gun-runners in the Southwest, and the U.S. gov't is determined to stamp out this illegal traffic' "

Paladin raised his eyebrows. "A beautiful actress," he said thoughtfully, and looked at Heyboy. "You said, I think, that Miss Armendariz is—I believe you used the word 'gorgeous.' "

Heyboy smiled smugly. "Is no doubt."

"Where is she now?" asked Paladin.

"In parlor, stamping pretty little foot in great impatience."

"I am concerned," said Paladin, getting up to adjust his scarf.

He went down in the open elevator, and through the iron grillwork took in the lobby as the elevator slowly traveled down from the high ceiling. The Carlton was one of San Francisco's expensive hotels; the ceiling was very

high, and from it hung great crystal chandeliers which bore wavering yellow gas-lights; the staircase was massive, and richly ornamented in gold and white; the cashier's station was within a massive oak counter with a marble top, and heavy iron bars separated the cashier from his customers, as in a bank. On strange-looking tables made of fancy woods—teak from India, mahogany from Brazil, ebony and satinwood from Africa—were oil lamps with huge milk-glass bowls painted in red and green. It was a big hotel, and men came and went or sat in the massive Victorian chairs reading their papers through eye-glasses, or had a quiet game of cards, or leaned on their canes and waited for a cab to take them to the docks or to a stage-station. It was a good picture of a luxurious room with rich, well-dressed clientele.

Occasionally, among the men, a woman might appear for a moment. She would always be dressed in the height of fashion, and she would move quietly and discreetly, but usually she was a little over-groomed.

Paladin nodded to the manager, who at the moment was in the cashier's cage, and went on across the lobby toward the parlor. But he slowed down, turned thoughtfully, and at the last moment went back to ask for mail.

The clerk handed him two letters. Paladin glanced at them and shook his head slightly. "By the way, is Miss Armendariz registered here?"

"Yes, sir. You know her?"

"I am about to. Do you happen to remember where she is from?"

The clerk busily shuffled more letters, glanced around to see that the manager was not watching him, and said in a low voice, "New Orleans, sir."

Paladin's eyebrows rose. "New Orleans," he repeated. "Traditional hotbed of filibusters."

"Sir?"

"William Walker, you know. General Karnes. Victorio Lopez."

"Oh, yes, sir. But filibusters are not all bad. There was the Marquis de Lafayette."

Paladin shuffled the two letters in his hands. "Most of those in the Latin-American countries seem to have been spurred on by love of adventure or ambition or greed for gold—or all three. Some have succeeded, too, and have become national heroes—for better or for worse."

"Many have not?"

"Most have not."

"One doesn't hear about those who do not."

"Naturally. If they are lucky, they wind up before a firing squad—like Henry Crabbe."

"Crabbe lost his head," said the clerk.

Paladin tapped the marble with his letters. "After he was dead, fortunately. They pickled it in brandy and toured the United States at twenty-five cents a look." He looked toward the parlor. "Filibustering is a hazardous business."

The clerk put the extra letters back in a box. Paladin said, "I will remember you for this," and continued across the big lobby to a wide door almost closed

by red velvet draperies. He stopped at a mirror in an ornate gold frame. He was tall, dark, young enough to be reckless but old enough to use discretion—and elegantly turned out in a white shirt, white waistcoat, black tails.

He moved toward the parlor door, hut a voice stopped him. "Mr. Paladin!"

He waited as a man equally tall, foppishly handsome, wearing tight, lavender-colored trousers and a white shirt with a ruffled bosom, hurried to meet him. "Mr. Paladin," he said with a heavy British enunciation, "I'm Reginald Satterthwaite. Met you at the gambling emporium on Grand Street, you know."

Paladin smiled. Satterthwaite had been quite pleasant that night. "If you'll pardon me for intruding," said Satterthwaite, "I do know, you know, that you are going to meet Miss—ah—Armendariz, the actress, you know, and—ah, I had it in mind to wangle an introduction to her."

Paladin said, "Later, maybe. I want to find out what she's like."

"Quite—ravishing, beyond all doubt."

"You have seen her?"

"I should think every male in San Francisco has sighed over her by now."

Paladin glanced toward the door and noted two more young men waiting. He said, "Look, Reggie, be a good fellow and get rid of those two Johnnies, and later, if Miss Armendariz turns out as I hope she is about to turn out, I'll remember you."

"I assure you, Mr. Paladin—by the way, I've never known whether that is your surname or your Christian name."

Paladin smiled. "It is either."

Satterthwaite raised his eyesbrows. "Indeed. Very well, Mr. Paladin, I meant to assure you that my intentions are strictly honorable."

"Yours may be," said Paladin, "but I don't know about Miss Armendariz. Now chase those two—"

"With alacrity, sir."

Paladin moved slowly. Satterthwaite moved fast. He spoke to the two young men with an air of authority. They glanced at Paladin and then slowly walked toward the big entranceway of the hotel.

Paladin pushed through the draperies and stepped into the still deeper rug of the parlor. In there, the lights were low; the windows were heavily draped; there was no cigar smoke—and there were a number of women, obviously the wives of guests. Paladin's eyes became adjusted to the dimness, and he saw, across the room, a rather tall woman, very stylishly dressed, who smiled at him; he felt the impact of the radiant personality of the actress, but he did not walk faster.

She was standing, but sat down as he approached. "Miss Armendariz?" he asked.

She smiled and offered her hand. "Mr. Paladin, I presume."

He bowed over her hand. "At your service, madam."

Her voice was husky, and carried an intriguing accent. "I was afraid you

would not come."

He noted her hair—soft, glossy, black—and her dusky skin, her high coloring. "It would have been my great loss if I had not," he said.

"You are a native of San Francisco?" she asked.

Paladin smiled. "You waste no time getting down to business."

Her eyes widened in protested innocence. She had very big, wide black eyes that seemed to be for him alone. "I chose this spot because it was isolated," she said, "but perhaps we had better move."

He followed her to a corner of the room. She was wearing a princess dress of dark, vivid blue taffeta that fitted her upper body closely, but flared out into a very wide pleated skirt; she wore a short coat and a small hat with ostrich plumes, and her hips swayed slightly as she walked. Above all, he liked her carriage: she walked as if assured and proud.

They sat down, and Paladin said, "You had a commission for me?"

She smiled. "Now it is you who talk business."

"Business first," he said. "Pleasure later."

She looked at him from the corner of one eye. "You are interested in pleasure, Mr. Paladin?"

He took a deep breath before he answered. She was a woman who must have moved many men—and would move many more. "How long do you expect to be in San Francisco?" he asked.

"As long as we draw a crowd."

"When do you open?"

"Tomorrow night at the Bella Union Melodeon in *Maud's Peril."*

He nodded. The Bella Union was not the highest-toned place in town, but it was not the lowest, either—and it was popular and sometimes put on expensive shows. He guessed that *Maud's Peril* would be a little rowdy but quite expensive.

"Do you expect to be in town for the next month?" she asked.

Paladin looked at her, his instinct warning him. With such a woman as this, a man could very easily forget caution. "it is hard to say," he told her.

"I do have a commission for somebody, Mr. Paladin, but I'm not sure—" She paused. "I don't think I can reveal it yet."

He smiled. "Very well. Let the pleasure come first."

She stood up. She was considerably more buxom than he had thought. "I will get in touch with you again."

He smiled. "You did not find that difficult, I trust."

She shrugged delightfully. "Not at all."

"You are opening tomorrow," he said. "Perhaps you would like to see Lawrence Barrett tonight in *Hamlet.* Melodrama is more popular in San Francisco these days, but Barrett is making a fine stand, even though the audiences have not been very kind to him."

She seemed immediately delighted. "I would love it!"

"I will meet you here at seven and a half. You will be a great sensation at

the Opera House."

She smiled with quiet assurance. She knew how beautiful and how radiant she was, and he felt proud to be the first to exhibit her in San Francisco—but he wondered about the nature of the commission she had mentioned, and he noted that she had been unduly curious about his movements for the immediate future.

He escorted her across the lobby to the elevator, and went back to find Heyboy at his elbow as he bought a cigar. "Get two box tickets to *Hamlet,"* he said. "For tonight."

Heyboy grinned as he took two rectangular pieces of pasteboard out of his flowing sleeve.

Paladin's eyebrows rose. "How did you know?"

"I saw the lady," said Heyboy, "and I am sure this will happen. Subsequently I obtained seats before the choice became too limited."

Paladin took the tickets. "Remind me to give you a bonus."

"That will be velly gleat pleasure," said Heyboy, bowing until his sleeves brushed the rug.

"And also," said Paladin, "see if you can find out anything about her: whom she knows, what other interests she has. Was she in trouble in New Orleans? Has she committed a murder?" He paused. "Or does she, perhaps, want to commit a murder?"

"She far too beautiful to make murder."

Paladin looked at him and chuckled, and then quoted from *Cymbeline:* "O most delicate fiend! Who is 't can read a woman?"

2

Paladin, now dressed in black, long-tailed coat, high black silk hat, a high standing collar with a dark red scarf, and fawn-colored trousers, carried his gold-headed walking stick under one arm as he approached the parlor door. He observed the group of stage-door hangers-on, and stopped. They moved slowly away from the parlor door, toward the big entranceway of the hotel. Paladin took his walking stick in hand and went into the parlor.

He saw her standing straight and tall, well-formed and proud, and went to her, his blood moving a little faster as he took in her exquisite loveliness. Her dress was all white, and it made her skin more dusky, and her hair blacker and more softly gleaming.

"Miss Armendariz," he said, "I must confess that you are dazzling. You take my breath away." He laughed easily. "I hope you will give it back."

She looked into his eyes. "I could not very well withhold anything from you, Paladin."

"Then," he said, offering her his arm, "perhaps you will tell me more about

the commission—a subject upon which you were reticent this afternoon."

She hesitated, and he could not tell whether it was natural or theatrical. "The time is not ready," she said finally. "There are still some things, Paladin, that I must find out before I engage you."

The men who had been at the parlor door drew back to let them through. Paladin smiled at her. "Such as my whereabouts for the next month or so?" he asked.

She bit her lip—an infinitesimal gesture, but definite. But she recovered quickly, and turned to him with a rueful smile. "Paladin, you are known as a man who fulfills his missions." She shuddered delicately. "I would not want to set you on a task and then decide the solution might be worse than the present dilemma."

"Riddles," he noted, and looked down at her. "You're as cautious as Hamlet of his two schoolmates when he said to his mother, the queen: 'Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd.' "

She smiled. "You are a detective. Surely you can guess."

"You can hardly expect me to be intellectual in the presence of such dazzling beauty." He started to move across the wooden boards to a hansom cab drawn up and waiting. "This is one of the few times Heyboy has let me down," he told her.

"In what way?" she asked curiously.

"He said you were gorgeous." His smile was for her alone. "It was an understatement."

He observed her quick, warm smile, and stopped as the uniformed doorman opened the door of the carriage, while the driver held tight rein on a big bay harness horse. The horse moved nervously, and pulled the cab away from the platform. "Allow me," said Paladin, and held his hand low.

She stepped in it lightly, and he smiled up at her for an instant. Then voices arose behind him on the platform. The bay moved forward a step. Miss ■ Armendariz hesitated, and withdrew her dainty foot. Paladin stood up, brushing his coat-tails.

Two men, who at first glance appeared to be drunk, pushed forward. One was big, primitively handsome but evilly so, well dressed in a frock coat and bowler. The other was shorter, chunky in build, Mexican in coloring and feature, with very heavy black eyebrows. The big one was leading; he had pale blue eyes that glared at Paladin, and he wore horsehide gloves rather than dress gloves.

Paladin saw the big man glance briefly at Miss Armendariz, and he thought their eyes met for an instant. Then the big man shouldered forward and leaped into the cab and shouted something at the driver. The darker man got in also, and the cab moved off.

Paladin looked at her. "They must have seen you before," he said. "They looked at me rather than you."

She seemed momentarily flustered. "Probably they have seen me on the

stage," she said.

"In New Orleans?" he asked quickly.

But she had regained her poise. "In many places, perhaps. I have been in the theater all my life."

The doorman hailed another cab, which was moving slowly down the middle of the muddy street.

"You did not start your career in this country?" he suggested.

She shrugged. "My speech gives me away."

"It is enticing," he said, but persisted. "Where, then, in Mexico City?"

She laughed as the cab drew in toward the hotel. "You do not forget what you are after, Paladin." Her eyes studied him. "Yes, in Mexico City—since you are bound to know more about me."

He smiled as he helped her into the cab, but said nothing.

They were seated—she with her beautiful white dress skirt carefully arranged around her, he with his silk hat tipped back a little. The driver cracked his whip, and the cab moved ahead with a lurch.

"I thought you might dispose of the—ruffians—with some mysterious trick," she said, looking at him, her head tilted to one side.

He smiled. "I fight for pay," he said.

"But not for—"

"Yes," he said, watching her, trying to see what went on behind those lustrous black eyes. "For love, for beauty, for femininity—but only when it is necessary. I'm not a hot-tempered youngster."

"I understand you fight for keeps."

"Is there any point in playing games when one's life is at stake?" He took her hand; it was warm and good to his touch. "Miss Armendariz," he said, you know what Portia said to Monsieur Le Bon: 'He will fence with his own shadow.' " He added, "But I am no French lord."

She said, "No, you fight only for money."

"I will tell you." He spoke in a detached way, for he was still wondering exactly why she had mentioned the possible fight. Was it that she felt secure in his protection, or was she the kind who liked to have men*fight—and possibly kill—over her? He forced his attention from that question and looked directly at her. "The big man acted more like a jealous husband than like a man who wanted a cab," he said.

For an instant she held her breath, but showed no other reaction. Then she smiled and quoted:

"Men should be what they seem;

Or those that be not, would they might seem none."

He agreed. "Sometimes a man feels possessive toward a woman because he would *like* to possess her."

They arrived at the opera house in a muddy street solidly packed with slowly moving carriages, and Paladin spoke to the driver. "Get as near as you can to the door, and I will carry the lady in."

"Very well, sir."

She was easy to carry. In spite of her height, she was not heavy, and she seemed to enjoy being carried. He set her down carefully.

"Thank you," she said, arranging her skirt.

"I have never carried a more pleasant burden," he said quietly.

They entered their box on the right side of the horseshoe, and Paladin helped her with her coat, placed his hat on a small table.

"1 hope you will smoke," she said. "I like the smell of a good cigar."

Paladin raised his eyebrows. Did this paragon of femininity have no faults at all?

"Very well," he said.

It was while he lit the cigar that he saw the curtain move as props were arranged behind it on the stage. He glanced at the orchestra pit, where the musicians were just filing in from under the stage; then he saw the two men in the front row. "Ruffians," she had called them-—but he had the feeling they were not hoodlums, that the act of taking over the carriage had been directed at him personally or—a thought occurred to him—at the girl.

He glanced at her. Half the men of the audience were staring at her, but she was not abashed; from time to time she smiled briefly and impersonally.

The opera house, like most, had a main floor, box seats, and balconies to the ceiling. The finishings were baroque, in carved wood, gilt, glass, ebony. A great crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling—at the moment the target of the small tin tags from plugs of tobacco, which seldom found a lodging-place on the fixture, but dropped harmlessly to the main floor. Harmlessly, but not without annoyance to those below. A bearded miner stood up and shouted, "Keep your damned tags to yourself," and hurled a handful of them, which fell, of course, before they reached the balcony, back onto the main floor, and provoked further catcalls and a few curses, along with raucous laughter from the balconies.

"It will be a rowdy crowd," said Paladin. "The men come in from the hills with full pockets, and they are determined to have their money's worth in two or three days. The opera or the theater is something they can see only seldom, but they come here for diversion—not for entertainment. They are not connoisseurs and don't want to be. If a play is too bad, though, they may run the actors out of the theater."

She seemed amused but not frightened. "I will get a sample of what to expect at the Bella Union, then."

"It will be worse there," he said.

The orchestra began to tune up, and the discordant sounds brought heckling from the audience.

"It sounds good-natured," said Miss Armendariz.

"It is," said Paladin. "But with men like these, good nature is not very far from an outburst of violence."

The audience was fairly attentive at the start-—held, perhaps, by Barrett's

impressive power, but toward the end of the second act, one of the supporting players appeared to have been imbibing off-stage, for his walk grew noticeably unsteady. The audience began to watch him, and Paladin knew they were growing restive. Between acts, many whisky bottles were brought into the open and passed around.

In the third act, the extra's voice was thick but he tried valiantly to deliver his lines. Barrett, annoyed, began to show his impatience by cutting in on the man's lines, and, characteristically for such an audience, the miners sided with the extra. Tension began to build, and Paladin knew something was in the offing.

It came in the gravedigger's scene in the fifth act. The gravedigger, working with pick and shovel in the grave, handed up a skull to Hamlet. "This same skull, sir—hie!— this same skull was Yorick's skull, the king's jester."

Hamlet took the skull. "This!"

A man in the audience shouted: "Hold it up so we can see it!"

Barrett, playing Hamlet, scowled, but he must have felt the temper of the audience, for he turned a little and held the skull somewhat higher.

"E'en that," said the gravedigger. "Hie!"

Barrett's most resounding voice tried to cover up the hiccup. "Let me see. Alas! poor Yorick."

"What happened to Yorick?" cried a man in the front row.

A voice answered from the balcony: "He fell in the garbage on Pacific Street and was drownded!"

Barrett ignored them. "I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it."

"It had orter!" a man shouted from the back of the audience.

The gravedigger looked out over the edge of the grave, seeming surprised at the interruption, and said loudly: "Hie!"

"Give the poor devil a drink!" said the man in the balcony.

"They are getting out of hand," Paladin observed.

Barrett went on: "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft."

"Hey!" said a new voice. "Yorick was no lady!"

The gravedigger said solemnly, "Hie!"

"Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table in a roar?" Barrett must have gotten rattled, for he skipped several lines. "Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing."

"Prithee!" shouted the man in the balcony. "Who slipped on a banana peel in Josie's House of All Nations?"

The gravedigger looked up, seemingly surprised, and said loudly, "Hie!"

Hamlet said, looking at the skull: "Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' the earth?"

Horatio: "E'en so."

The gravedigger, out of sight, said "Hie! Hie!" and started climbing out of the grave.

Hamlet said: "And smelt so? pah!"

"Prithee!" shouted a man on the main floor. "He don't like the way poor Yorick smells!"

The gravedigger was trying again to climb out. Barrett glanced at the heckler in the audience, then went on, his great voice trying to drown out, in its profundity, the interruptions: "To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole?"

The gravedigger had one leg over the side of the grave, but as he heard Barrett's majestic tones roll out through the theater, he stared at Barrett with wide eyes. Then without volition he uttered a loud "Hie!" and fell back into the grave.

The man in the balcony shouted: "Give the poor bastard a hand!"

Barrett went on in the words of Hamlet, increasing the volume to the full power of his voice to drown out the catcalls that came with ominous frequency: ". . . Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; . . ."

The gravedigger was trying again to climb out.

The man in the balcony threw a handful of tobacco tags at the stage, but they broke at the chandelier and fell on the main-floor audience. A bearded miner stood up and angrily shook his fist at the balcony. "You yellow-livered scum!" he said. "Come on down and fight!"

He had crossed the borderline. Those in the balcony shouted at him, and drowned out Barrett's attempts to ward off the explosion. The bearded miner hurled an empty whisky bottle at the balcony.

A roar went up from the upper sections, and was met by an equally belligerent roar from the main floor. More whisky bottles sailed upward, and then, abruptly, the air was filled with whisky bottles.

Barrett glanced at the audience and made a quick exit from the stage, followed by Horatio. The gravedigger tried desperately to get out, but a whisky bottle bounced across the boards. He stared at it with his eyes wide; then his mouth opened. He looked at the audience as if for the first time aware of the riot impending; his eyes grew wider; he threw up his hands and fell back into the grave.

"Keep away from the railing!" Paladin warned Miss Armendariz above the tumult.

She stepped back quickly.

At that moment, the doors at the rear of the main floor swung inward, and the booted crowds from the upper sections poured onto the main floor, to be met in battle by those who had been there first.

Paladin sought the big man, but for a moment did not see him. The baritone had either finished or had been cut off; the curtain had dropped; the members of the orchestra, not unaccustomed to such contingencies, were slipping out

quietly through the small door under the stage. Paladin frowned. Then he saw the big man making for an exit at the side. The smaller man tried to follow him, but was cut off by the crowd, which now retreated toward the stage under pressure of the influx from the balcony.

"Here's your coat," said Paladin. "Hurry!"

She looked up at him questioningly. Her eyes were glowing from the violence below. Then she obediently slipped her arms into the big sleeves, and Paladin parted the curtains at the back of the box to look out.

The big man was less than ten feet away, and Paladin took a short grip on his walking stick, and waited. The man's cold blue eyes did not change as he advanced, with a two-edged Mexican knife in his hand.

Paladin waited for him, just clear of the draperies. The man lunged at him, but Paladin sidestepped and hit the man on the back of the head with his stick, then followed him as the man plunged into the box.

While Miss Armendariz stood back against the rail, her eyes wider than ever, the man jumped to his feet and swung the knife at Paladin with a sidearm cutting motion. Paladin stepped back and whipped the stick down on the man's wrist as the knife went by his chest. The knife dropped. The man's blue eyes blazed, and he closed in with a bear hug. Paladin got both hands under his chin and against his adam's-apple, broke him loose, kicked him in the groin, and as the man bent over, Paladin straightened him with two hard fists to the jaw, picked him up, half-dazed, by the vest and one leg, and heaved him over the rail onto the seats below, then turned to meet the Mexican coming through the draperies, also with a knife. But this one knew more about knife-fighting; he came in with the blade held in front of him, and low. Paladin threw his silk hat in the Mexican's face and snatched up the knife from the floor. He began to circle to his right; the Mexican followed. His foot touched his walking stick, and he stopped. The Mexican thrust at his bowels; Paladin sidestepped and picked up the stick. When the Mexican faced him again, he had the stick in his right hand, the knife in his left.

"Get out of here," he said, circling, "or I'll cut your guts out."

He saw the flicker of hesitation in the Mexican's eyes. The Mexican was then with his back to the opening. Paladin feinted; the Mexican drew back, then started forward, but Paladin planted the end of his stick on the man's chest and pushed him backward with a heave that sent him stumbling. Paladin followed him into the hall and stood over him. "Drop your knife!" he said.

The Mexican, looking fearful, loosened his fingers, and the knife clattered on the floor.

"Get up and get out!" said Paladin, and stepped back. The Mexican scrambled up and backed away, then turned and ran.

Miss Armendariz threw her arms around Paladin's neck and kissed him. "You're wonderful!" she breathed.

He enjoyed it for a moment, then put her off gently. "We'd better be on our way. That's all the opera we shall. see here tonight." He glanced at the fighting

mob below. "It's probably the only place in the world where you can be sure of at least one riot a week."

But her eyes were on his, and hers were glowing. "You were magnificent," she said.

They started out. "That isn't really what you wanted to find out, is it?"

"No-o-o-o—but you are not displeased that I said it."

"By no means." He put an arm around her and steered her through the fringes of the crowd to the outside. From the main floor came the cracking and screeching of seats being broken up.

A cab was waiting, and Paladin lifted her into it and told the driver, "Start moving."

Her face was a pale glow in the dim light from distant gas lamps. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I'm famished. I don't know why."

"Excitement," he said. "We'll have dinner at the Golden Bear."

On the way in, they passed a poster, and she stopped to look at it. "Paladin, it says something about a man's head."

"Common enough in San Francisco," he said.

She read aloud: "There will be exhibited for one day only at the Miners' Museum the head of the renowned bandit, loaquin Murieta, and the hand of Three-Finger Phil Williams, the Southwest's most notorious and most successful filibuster! Admission 25c."

She turned to Paladin. She was so close that she was - almost in his arms. "Could we see it?" she asked.

"No reason why not," he said. "It is not particularly elevating, but it's a part of San Francisco that no one should miss."

She was a good dinner companion; her manners were excellent; she drank champagne copiously but she became even more pleasant; once she leaned over and squeezed his hand.

Later, they took a cab to the museum, where, in various jars and containers, were grisly relics of California's wilder days. The head of Murieta had shrunk until it was hardly recognizable, and a placard said: *Murieta, an innocent Mexican miner who was robbed and who saw his wife repeatedly raped by irresponsible miners, entered a life of crime and violence. He personally murdered .every man who had abused his wife, but was shot and killed by Capt. Love of the Rangers. His was a life dedicated to revenge.*

"Oh!" she cried. "How terrible!"

"Don't take it too seriously," he advised. "Many such abuses did go on in Gold Rush days, but there is no certainty that they happened to him. More likely he was a common outlaw."

She moved on to a second. *Gen. Henry Crabbe,* it said. *The great filibuster who almost conquered Northern Mexico and set up an independent republic. He was executed by Mexican soldiers and his head pickled in brandy. He died for an ideal.*

"And Henry Crabbe?" she asked. "He also—"

"Hard to say, whether it was an ideal or merely a lust for adventure and perhaps power. At any rate, he might have put it across if he had used good sense."

She moved on to a shrunken hand. *The hand of Three-Finger Phil Williams, the great filibuster, who was about to succeed where Crabbe failed, when he was stricken down by a brother outlaw, and his hand brought in to claim the reward of $2,000.*

"Phil was killed only a few months ago," said Paladin, but stopped short as he saw a vague smile playing around her lovely mouth. "You are amused?"

She looked up quickly. "Only at the barbarity of men who would so exhibit these gruesome relics."

"And," suggested Paladin, "at the primitive savagery of those who come to look."

"Oh, Paladin!"

He smiled. "Never mind. They all do."

He started for the door, but noticed that she had turned back to look at the hand, and was puzzled at the same vague smile on her lips.

They returned to the Carlton in a cab. Paladin sat silent for several blocks, but finally he said, "Miss Ar-mendariz, there is much that goes on here that does not come out into the open."

"Yes, Paladin?" she said in her soft voice.

"First, who are the two men?"

She shook her head, eyes wide.

"Second, why are they interested in me?"

"Perhaps they are criminals who know you are after them."

"I am not after any criminals." He looked at her. "Whether or not they are criminals, they are not used to San Francisco. The big one acts very strange, and I have a distinct impression that he is not the unlettered, uncouth man he is pretending to be." He looked at her. "You are sure you don't know him?"

She shook her head slowly, her eyes on his.

"Could he be involved in the commission you were thinking of?"

She continued to shake her head.

"You are a lady," he said, "but you are also a woman, and I'm afraid I don't believe you, Miss Armendariz."

"I give you my solemn word of honor—and I am willing to seal it with a kiss."

He looked at her for a moment. "I rather think you are most interested in the kiss." But something held him back.

"You.do not believe me?"

"I am not inclined to make an issue of your answers," he said. "All I am interested in at the moment is: when are those two going to make another attempt on me?"

"You think they will?"

"Twice in one evening they have either picked a fight or tried to. They are not regular cut-throats, or they would waylay me. They are used to operating in the open, by force and not by subterfuge." The cab pulled to one side of the street and stopped. "Here we are," he said.

"This is the Hotel Carlton!"

"Yes."

"What are we going to do here?"

"I," he said, "am going to write a letter."

"But—the night is early."

"Madam," he said, "I regret to say that it seems foolish for me to spend the rest of the night escorting you around San Francisco and giving those two hoodlums another chance at me. Though you are the most beautiful woman in San Francisco, and though you have been most pleasant and I am honored to have your company, I am forced to say that tonight I do not feel like carrying it any further."

She was displeased, and did not at once offer to get up. "I had thought there were many things in San Francisco to see," she said slowly.

"Yes, madam."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Is the great Paladin, then, no longer interested in the ordinary pleasures of life?"

He studied her for a moment. She was piqued, but she would get over it. "Indeed he is," he answered. "One of the simplest being living itself." He alighted from the cab and held out his hand. "Come, Miss Armendariz. I will help you in."

3

He went into the bar for a drink, and for a few minutes watched a poker game. In the gambling places they seldom played a sober game like poker, but a man could find some interesting games in the Carlton. He watched a young man from the East lose $9,000 on a straight with a hole in the middle, and shook his head. It was one way to circulate money.

He went up in the elevator, having watched until he knew that Miss Armendariz had gone up before him to her room. He left the elevator and went to his suite, where he picked up the newspaper again. *$1,000 reward,* it said. *California papers please copy.* Had Mrs. Marsh expected him to see that item? And the additional item that gun-running was focused on Santa Fe. Wait a minute! He sat up straighter. Miss Armendariz had registered from New Orleans, where a gun-running shipment might well originate, for rifles could travel overland with no difficulty; it was only when they were loaded on a ship that trouble began. And, with Miss Amendariz, came the two strange men. Altogether, it might have been a coincidence. Rather a fantastic coincidence, but . . . there was an old saying handed down on the frontier:

"There is no coincidence in Indian country." He nodded as he recalled that.

He used his pen knife to clip the reward offer from the paper, attached his card to it, and addressed an envelope to Mrs. Marsh at Santa Fe.

The card was plain white, and in the center, in black, was a picture of a knight on horseback: Paladin, a peer of Charlemagne, a paragon of knighthood, a gallant man of chivalrous devotion. He looked at the card for a moment. Yes, of course, it was devotion at a price. Sometimes the price was high; sometimes it was nothing; it depended on what the client could pay. But always there was a price. There were those who said that Paladin went above and beyond what he was bbligated to do, but he justified it by a belief that he quoted a high price and therefore was obligated to take extreme measures, at times, to fulfill his side of the contract.

He put the reward offer and the card in the envelope, sealed it, and got up. He took the letter to the desk, and the clerk studied it under the usual, pretext of being sure it was addressed properly. "Lots of mail for Santa Fe these days," he remarked. "By the way, Mr. Paladin, the postage on that will be ten cents."

"I'll risk it," said Paladin. "Who else is sending mail to Santa Fe?"

The clerk looked around cautiously to ascertain that nobody else was listening, then said casually, "Miss Ar-mendariz brought down a note a few minutes ago, and a large man with a cut lip brought one in a half hour ago."

"Does the big man stay here?"

"No, sir, as far as I know, he does not. He has been around a good deal, but no one seems to know who he is. Probably a low character."

Paladin quietly laid a silver dollar on the marble. "Do you know to whom the letters were addressed?"

The clerk looked at the coin, then at the box where he had put Paladin's letter. He took out a handful of letters and shuffled through them, but finally shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Paladin, those have gone to the post office. I do remember they were addressed to the same person, but I can't recall the name."

Paladin nodded. He left the dollar where it was, and returned to his room. The pieces began to come together after a fashion. Were both the girl and the man connected with the gun-running, and, if so, to whom were they writing in Santa Fe?

And for what? To report on San Francisco, to report on the opera—or to report on Paladin? In the last case, it seemed unlikely they would have much to report except that Paladin was in San Francisco.

Paladin put on black trousers and black shirt; he set a pair of black boots by his bed. He took his gun-belt out of the closet and checked the cylinder of each six-shooter; the leather was black, and on each holster was a silver knight. He tried on his hat—a wide-brimmed black Stetson with a flat-topped crown; then laid the hat on the floor. He got a derringer out of the dresser, examined it, tried it under his shirt, then laid it down with his boots. He took a

sheath from the dresser, withdrew a long-bladed knife, tried the edge for sharpness, put it back in the sheath, and set that also by his boots.

He lay down on top of the bed. He had time for three hours' sleep; then he would ride out early and get a start on anybody else who might be planning to travel toward Santa Fe with him. He began to relax, thinking over the events of the evening. It rather seemed to him that he might be heading into considerably more than a missing-person case.

He was dozing when he heard a knock at the door, and got up to answer it. Satterthwaite was standing in the corridor.

"What's bothering you this time of night?" asked Paladin.

"Mr.—ah—Paladin, my information is that you are going to Santa Fe to fight the filibusters, and I would consider it a privilege if you would allow me to go along."

Paladin frowned. "Where did you hear that?"

"I overheard two gentlemen talking, sir, and I heard the name Paladin mentioned, and—I'm afraid I eavesdropped a trifle."

Paladin was thoughtful. "Can you use a six-shooter?" he asked.

Satterthwaite whipped his hand toward his coat, and then, with fair speed, a huge old horse-pistol appeared in it. "Be careful," said Paladin. "That thing might be loaded."

"Yes, of course," said Satterthwaite. "Do you see that moth on the window?"

Paladin looked. "Yes."

A tremendous explosion sounded in his ears. The acrid smell of gunpowder filled his nostrils, and young Satterthwaite was hidden in a cloud of white smoke. Paladin stared at the window. Glass had tinkled on the floor, and there was a hole as big as his fist exactly where the moth had been. Paladin said slowly, "Either you hit it or you scared it."

"I hit it, of course."

"Even so, you have ruined a window glass, to say nothing of having destroyed the peace and serenity of the guests at the Carlton."

Satterthwaite put the pistol back in its holster, and from his coat pocket took a roll of bills as big as a coffee cup. The outside one was a twenty.

"They told me I must be able to prove my ability to handle all situations at any time," said Satterthwaite.

Paladin's eyes narrowed. It might be that he could use some help on this assignment. He snatched the money from Satterthwaite, and backed away.

Satterthwaite was stunned for an instant, then he charged Paladin, who coolly held the money behind him and used his knees to block the man. Satterthwaite backed away and began to stiffen. "You cahn't do this, you know," he said, and charged Paladin with a knife. That was somewhat unexpected. Paladin dropped the roll on the floor, and moved to meet him. He got the younger man's knife wrist in his left, and with his right crooked around Satterthwaite's neck, began to pull his head in close. Then Satterthwaite came

up with his free arm and jabbed at his eyes. He ducked, and had to loosen his hold on Satterthwaite's neck. They rolled on the floor, and Paladin began to breathe hard. This young Englishman was strong and tough. Paladin began to bear against him with his weight. He got him on his back, but Satterthwaite suddenly threw himself like a whip, squirmed from under Paladin, and landed on top. It began to look serious. Paladin still had his knife arm, but he was tiring. It seemed, suddenly, that all he had been doing all evening was fight — and Satterthwaite began to hit him in the face with his fist.

Heyboy came up silently behind Satterthwaite, and poised a vase high over the younger man's head, but Paladin, though hard pressed, shook his head. Heyboy backed away, but not far. Then Paladin gathered himself for a tremendous heave that threw Satterthwaite on his back, and a moment later Paladin was on top. He had the knife in his own hand, but Satterthwaite also had his wrist. Paladin finally put his knee against Satterthwaite's throat long enough to make him lie still. "I don't want your money," he said. "I just wanted to know if you could and would fight for it."

He got up slowly. Satterthwaite dusted the seat of his pants and brushed himself all over, then held out his hand. "I didn't mind losing the money, Mr. Paladin, there's plenty more where that came from."

"Then why try to commit murder to keep it?" asked Paladin, breathing hard.

Satterthwaite smiled apologetically. "I don't like to lose it that way, you know."

"You'll do," Paladin said. "We ride out on horseback at three o'clock—two hours from now. We'll change horses until we catch the stage that left here day before yesterday. That will be along about Warner's Ranch. Meanwhile, keep that money under cover, and you won't have to prove your ability so often."

"Thank you, sir." Satterthwaite raised his glass. "A toast to the black knight."

Paladin asked, "Why do you want to go?"

Satterthwaite said earnestly, "Mr. Paladin, sir, you always know the most beautiful women in the world, and perhaps, if I accompany you far enough, I can get you to introduce me to one of them."

"A noble motive," said Paladin. "Now let's get a few winks of sleep."

4

It was pitch black when they left the hotel. Heyboy had ordered two horses to ride and one as a spare. They trotted quietly down to Market Street and then south, and by dawn were in the rolling hills of the peninsula. A couple of hours later, it was obvious that riders were behind them. Down through Pacheco Pass, -Firebaugh's Ferry, Widow Smith's, and on to Los Angeles—every day they were followed at six to ten miles by two horsemen, who never

came closer and did not' fall farther back. When Paladin and Satterthwaite pulled off to one side in a vineyard, the two riders came on for a while, then stopped and also disappeared.

"They aren't fools," muttered Paladin.

They got back on the trail, and within an hour they were followed again. Paladin shrugged. "Maybe they don't know the way."

"We could wait them out," Satterthwaite suggested.

"And miss the stage."

"Why not ride horseback all the way?"

"Apaches," said Paladin. "They aren't as bad as they were before the war, but two men on horseback would not have a chance."

They overtook the stage at Tejunga Stage Station, but Paladin elected to ride another twenty-two miles to Warner's, to leave the horses there. At Warner's, he and Satterthwaite boarded the stage as it stopped for the passengers to eat a hasty meal. The Concord went through Warner's Pass and followed the mountains to Vallecito, then struck off into the desert, a waste of land that grew little but cactus and an occasional feathery palo verde or purple-misted ironwood. They had eaten also at Vallecito, and now settled down to a long ride through oppressive heat. They stopped briefly at Cook's Wells, then went on across the endless, burning desert to Yuma. And at Yuma, Paladin got his first real shock, for, standing before the brown adobe station, were the two men who had been in his way that night in San Francisco. Paladin watched them as the driver pulled up his mules. "Those are the two who knew where I was going?" he asked Satterthwaite.

The Englishman nodded.

"The hotel clerk—I suppose he'd as soon tell them as me. But he didn't know. Heyboy didn't know, but he might have guessed. But Heyboy would not tell if he did guess."

"Maybe they intercepted your mail, and then watched your room."

Paladin nodded. "They must have passed us in the dark, and come on to Yuma."

The stage stopped, and they got out stiffly. Paladin walked up to the big man. "I have seen you before," he said.

The big man said, "You may see me again."

"It's bad enough to see you," said Paladin, "but don't take the back seats. They belong to us. You will have to ride in the middle."

"I'll ride where I please," the big man growled, but again Paladin had the feeling that he was not as crude as he appeared.

Paladin went inside for a cup of black, bitter coffee. He said to Satterthwaite, "The coffee has gotten steadily worse since we left the city."

"I shudder," said Satterthwaite, "to think what it may be in Santa Fe."

"I must admit," said Paladin, moving over as the other three passengers clomped in, "that this has given me a start. These men obviously want to be in Santa Fe when we are."

"Do you think there will be trouble on the stage?"

"I doubt it—but let's not make any hasty wagers."

"The big one wears gloves," said Satterthwaite.

"Horsehide gloves—not dress gloves. Those are work gloves—and well used."

The driver came in while the hostlers were hitching up a fresh team. "Tried to get a detail of soldiers to cross Arizona," he said, "but the major said he didn't have none to spare."

Paladin swallowed some of the bitter coffee.

"For protection against Indians?" asked Satterthwaite.

The driver pushed back his big hat and wiped his forehead with a blue bandanna. "Outlaws as much as anything. Outlaws are crossing the border under pretense of revolution, but they're all robbers and murderers and no better than the Indians. Somebody raises the *grito,* and every outlaw in the country joins up."

"What's a *grito?"* asked Satterthwaite.

"It's a battle-cry, a . . ."

"A call to revolution," suggested Paladin.

"Uh-huh, I reckon. Well—" He slammed the heavy cup down on the home-made cottonwood table, and went out. Paladin and Satterthwaite followed, and got their seats in the rear. The three other passengers—two Mexican ranchers and a small boy—got in front and rode backward. The two men from San Francisco sat on the small seats in the middle, with their backs to Paladin and Satterthwaite.

They rolled steadily across the white sands, through the stifling heat. Dust poured in through the windows and sifted in through the cracks. They tried closing the windows, but it became unbearably hot. They went on to Tucson, and then struck out along the Gila, and finally across a waterless stretch of open desert until they hit Picacho on the Rio Grande. There they stopped to eat. A few miles farther, at Mesilla, they got out and took their carpetbags, and Paladin was not unprepared when the two other men did the same.

The stage for Santa Fe, said the station keeper, would be made up there, and would leave in about an hour. They'd better rest up and feed up, for there was still a lot of desert on the way north.

"With Indians?" asked Satterthwaite.

"A few," the man said. "But mostly they hain't been bad around these parts. These here are Mescaleros, and they ain't as bad as them Cherycows, nohow. Jest don't turn your back on 'em."

The stage went north, through Fray Cristobal, Parida, Valencia—tiny Mexican villages of brown adobe huts and countless barking dogs. On to Albuquerque—and through all this time the two men in the middle seats were almost entirely silent, each riding with his own thoughts—whatever they might have been. Paladin studied the men but did not learn much.

At Albuquerque they stopped to eat, and there a Mexican and his young

wife, obviously *enceinte,* got on to go to Sante Fe.

They started out with fresh mules, but north of Albuquerque, in a cloud of heavy dust, the driver suddenly shouted, "Gents! Get your hardware unlimbered!"

Paladin watched from the right window. Five Indians clad in leggings and moccasins rode past them, just out of pistol-shot. Paladin said, "Watch the other side."

The driver called down, "Anybody bring a rifle?"

No one had a rifle, but Paladin and Satterthwaite each drew a six-shooter. The two men from San Francisco got on the floor. The Indians began to circle.

"Are those—you know—real Indians?" asked Satter-thwaite.

"Keep your head down," the big man growled, "or you'll find out."

Arrows began to zip into the body of the coach, and one came through a window and stuck into the wood just in front of Paladin's eyes. The men from San Francisco fired occasionally, but Paladin saved his shots. The coach filled with white smoke, and from time to time the heavy boom of the driver's Sharps sounded above them. The woman began to cry; the man soothed her in soft Spanish.

"Tell her to cut out that whimpering!" the big man shouted suddenly.

"Sefior, she is frighten', and she is going to have a baby. There is nothing I can do."

For an instant there was silence, then the war-cry of the Mescaleros, then the boom of the Sharps. Paladin thought it strange the Indians were not trying to close in.

"Help's comin'!" shouted the driver.

"I hear it!" Satterthwaite said under his breath.

The drum of heavy hoofbeats came through the ground; a column of mixed Mexicans and *anglos* rode whooping out of the south, and the Indians disappeared as quickly as they had appeared.

Paladin watched with narrowed eyes, and shouted to the driver: "How far are we from Santa Fe?"

"About a day's ride by horseback."

There were eight men in the rescue column, and Paladin did not like their looks. They crowded up close, and all but one got off their horses.

The leader, a big, swarthy Mexican with a huge straw hat, stood spraddle-legged and rolled a cigarette with dark brown paper, apparently enjoying the attention he was getting as they waited for him to speak. He finished the cigarette, said "Fuego!" and a smaller Mexican—a boy about fourteen years old—came with a sulphur match to light the cigarette. The big outlaw puffed on it for a moment and then looked around at them. His sardonic eyes swept the men from San Francisco with a glance and went on to the woman. His eyes widened. "Ah, chiquita!" He stepped toward her.

Her husband turned ashen, but muttered, "Enceinte." The big outlaw turned to him and without a change of expression slapped the man so hard he

knocked Him off his feet. But he turned from the girl to Paladin, and looked him up and down. "A *caballero,* eh," he said, looking at the knights on Paladin's holsters.

Paladin said nothing. It was impossible to predict what this man might attempt, for he himself did not know. The two men from San Francisco did not seem to be worried, and Paladin stuck his thumbs in his belt and waited.

The big outlaw stood before them, puffing his cigarette. "I want to see all pocketbooks," he said.

The Mexican passenger gave up his—a long coin purse with a gold clasp, heavy with metal coins. The big outlaw chuckled, and tossed the purse to the man on horseback. "Now, you. Serior Black Hat."

Paladin took a flat wallet from inside his shirt. "There isn't much but a letter of credit."

The big outlaw shrugged when he looked inside. "I wish you'd carry more gold. Letters of credit have no value out here."

Paladin spoke to Satterthwaite, on his left. "You'd might as well give up your roll," he said.

Satterthwaite agreed. "He has nice six-shooters on his hips. However, Mr. Paladin, as to my money—"

"Yes?"

"I left most of it with Wells Fargo, on Montgomery Street."

Paladin was incredulous. "At three o'clock in the morning?"

"I have a slight acquaintance with some of the officers there."

"I would think so," said Paladin.

The big outlaw tossed Satterthwaite's small roll of bills to the horse-holder, and turned back to Paladin. "Now, serior—"

Paladin leaped to one side. A six-shooter appeared in the big outlaw's hand, and red fire blazed from it as he shot at Paladin. But Paladin had a pistol in the back of the man from San Francisco. "Tell your man to bring two horses to this gentleman"—he indicated Satterthwaite— "and go back where he is now."

The big outlaw's eyes blazed.

"Otherwise I may **be forced to put a bullet** into this *hombre* here. Would you want that?"

The outlaw glared at him as the powder smoke thinned. Paladin jammed the gun harder into the big man's back, and the big man said sharply, *"Pronto,* Pepe!"

Paladin smiled grimly at that use of the outlaw's name.

The outlaw stared at him, then jerked a thumb at the horse-holder, who rode forward slowly, leading two horses.

"The money too," said Paladin, and waited until it was returned. Then Paladin looked at the two Mexican passengers. "You can ride?"

"Si, sefior—both."

"Get on and start for Santa Fe."

The man said eagerly, *"Si,* sefior," and the woman sobbed in relief, for the brutality of outlaws was well known.

Paladin gave them a moment's start, and as soon as they were out of sight, he said, "Now bring two *good* horses."

The outlaw glared and reached for his six-shooter, but Paladin was well shielded.

"Vamos, jumento!" the big man from San Francisco said impatiently.

The outlaw looked at the horse-holder and nodded.

When the horses were before them, and the horse-holder back on the one remaining horse, Paladin said to Satter-thwaite, "Get in the saddle and lead them off a way—out of pistol-shot." .

"I shall be happy to comply."

"Tell me when you're there."

He heard the crunch of hoofs on the hard alkali crust of dirt, and in a moment Satterthwaite's voice floated back: "Ready, Mr. Paladin."

Paladin had both guns in his hands. "Walk forward, you." He pushed the muzzle into the big man's back and propelled him. Paladin stood in the open, both six-shooters menacing them. There were seven, counting the two from the city. The stage-driver was sitting quietly near the front wheel of his stage.

"Line up, all of you, with your backs toward me. The first one who moves, gets a .44 slug through his kidneys." He began to back away, glancing behind once to see that the path was clear. "Stay lined up," he said. "Don't reach for your guns."

Every few feet he spoke to them. "Keep looking at the sky, or I'll start shooting."

Presently he heard Satterthwaite's low voice: "You have almost reached the rendezvous point, Mr. Paladin."

"Put the reins in my left hand."

He felt the rawhide strips in his hand, turned to the horse and swung into the big Mexican saddle with a horn like a dinner-plate. He kicked the horse in the flanks with his heels, and they rode north at a hard gallop. A few shots sounded behind them, but those became fainter, and then were heard no more.

In a few minutes, Paladin pulled up to a walk. "There isn't much they can do now. There's only one saddle horse among them."

Satterthwaite said, shaking his head, "Mr. Paladin, I did not see how we could get out of that predicament."

"There are more ways to kill a cat than stuffing it with butter."

"Frankly, Mr. Paladin, from the looks and actions of the big outlaw, I thought we were done for. He was merely working himself into a killing frenzy, it appeared."

"Your conclusions are right," said Paladin, turning in the saddle to look behind. "This is the worst of insurrection. It may be started by a good and thoughtful man for a just and rightful purpose, but inevitably it attracts beasts like Pepe, who join because it gives them a certain semblance of legitimacy

and a degree of real or fancied protection."

"The subsequent activities seem to be the same," said Satterthwaite.

Paladin kicked his horse into a trot. "It won't do to linger. Undoubtedly they will steal more horses as soon as they find some loose."

They jogged for a while. Then Paladin pulled the horses down to a walk.

Satterthwaite got down to stretch his legs "These terrible Western saddles—how does a man learn to ride one?"

Paladin chuckled. "You grow to fit it—if you start early enough."

"You knew," said Satterthwaite, "that the two from the city were in with the outlaw, but to save my blahsted life I don't know how."

"Pepe was stupid," said Paladin. "He took money from three persons, but he made no pretense of taking it from our *companeros."*

Satterthwaite looked at his horse-pistol, then dropped it back in its holster. "They were just robbing us, then?"

"The robbery was incidental. Pepe was to kill us, and because he wanted to have some fun out of the killing and work himself up to it, we're riding and they're walking."

"One might gather," said Satterthwaite, "that they don't like you."

Paladin was studying the hilly landscape ahead. "A penetrating observation. They want especially to keep me away from Santa Fe—which argues that there are good reasons for my being in Santa Fe."

"There must be dark doings in that town—since they are going to so much trouble."

Paladin said solemnly: " 'The bright day is done, and we are for the dark.' "

The horses finished climbing a slope, and dropped down into a small canyon. Paladin pulled up and dismounted to give the horses a breather. "Take the reins," he said, "and don't let them get away, or we'll be afoot." He scanned the thin, dusty vegetation which lay in every direction; the hills—sometimes sloping, sometimes precipitous, the brown dust that lay everywhere, the dust devils—tiny whirlwinds of dust that came from nowhere, went across the dry land, and disappeared into nowhere.

"It doesn't look like much," he said.

"What can such a country possibly be good for?" asked Satterthwaite.

Paladin looked at him. "Gun-running, hold-ups, an occasional murder."

"And Indians," said Satterthwaite.

"Those Indians were paid to do that job. That was the outlaw leader's way of getting near us without alarming us."

Paladin sat on his haunches for a moment, looking for a stem of grass to chew, but gave it up. There was nothing within his reach but a scrubby, stunted variety of prickly pear, and that seemed dried up and withered from the sun and the lack of moisture. He got up and surveyed the horizon in all directions. "What I don't understand," he said finally, "is how the men from the city got word to Pepe. I was watching them at every stop, but I never did see them talk to anybody in particular."

"He might have written a note."

Paladin was thoughtful. "He would have had to give it to somebody. And I doubt that Pepe can read. Perhaps one of the Mexican hostlers at a stage station carried the message. Yes, I suppose so."

"I'm glad you settled that," said Satterthwaite. "I confess I am more concerned over the future. We seem to have left our commissary behind."

Paladin was walking to the top of the hill. He looked south for a moment, then came down. "The wolves are after us," he said. "We'd better move."

"How far?"

"Three or four miles—coming slowly."

They crossed the bottom of the canyon, and rode down the other side at a trot. Satterthwaite began to look serious. "It seemed something of a lark at first," he explained, "but I'm experiencing a terrible thirst, and there is no water in sight, but the killers are behind. I say, it reads like a novel."

"It *is* like a book," Paladin said, "but if any blood is shed, it may be ours."

He stopped behind the next big clump of manzanita, and held the horses in tight while he watched the back trail. In a few minutes, seven men appeared, walking their animals down a long slope. Paladin nodded. "They have our trail, all right, but they aren't hurrying. We'd better not speed up, or we might lose a horse; therefore we'll have to keep going north."

"This might be the trail for the contraband rifles," said Satterthwaite.

"Possibly." He mounted his horse and stood up in the saddle. "Some cows foraging along here with a T Shepherd's Crook—or, more likely, a T Buggy Whip. We can't be more than a few hours' ride from civilization."

Paladin looked over the horses. "Let's trot for an hour," he said. "They're mustangs. They should stand it."

But before the hour was up, they heard again the now familiar sound of Indians, and Paladin frowned. "What have we here—an Indian uprising?"

"It might be possible," said Satterthwaite, "that the Indians who attacked our stage—or pretended to—got enthusiastic over the idea and set out to find some scalps."

Paladin was thoughtful. "You learn the ways of the country fast," he observed.

They spurred their horses into a lope, and the Indian yells became louder. They rode out on a mesa, and Paladin pulled up suddenly. "Down there," he said. "Five Indians firing on a line-rider's shack!"

The Indians' horses were grazing peacefully at a distance and the yells had ceased. But periodically came the flat crack of an Indian cartridge, sparsely loaded with powder, and sometimes the heavier boom of a rifle from the adobe hut. The Indian bullets knocked gouts of dirt from the hut, and, with each heavy boom, a cloud of white smoke puffed out of the tiny squares that served as windows.

"It seems strange, though," said Paladin. "What are they after?"

"Horses," said Satterthwaite. "The books always say the Indians raid for

horses."

Paladin nodded slowly. "Except I haven't—wait a minute! Yes, there are droppings. Then the horses are inside the adobe."

"Maybe it's only one horse."

"Two," said Paladin. "Otherwise, having had his horse there, he would have run for it."

"How many are in the adobe, then?"

"Two—because I have heard shots from two different rifles."

"Why do the Indian rifles sound so light?"

"They can't get enough powder, so they load their cartridges light. They aren't much good for long range shooting, but the Indian doesn't worry about that. He's a good enough frontiersman to get close to his game."

"Do we rescue them down there?" asked Satterthwaite.

Paladin nodded. "It won't be hard. We'll ride in yelling, and fire a couple of shots, and stampede the Indians' horses—which are over there to the left—and they will fade into the desert. The effect of the whisky used to bribe them has about worn off anyway."

Satterthwaite pulled his horse pistol from its holster. "I'm ready!" he said.

Paladin grinned. "Don't fire that pistol in the air. You have only one shot in it."

Satterthwaite made a motion, and produced a six-shooter from a holster under his arm. "I'm not entirely defenseless, Mr. Paladin."

"All right. Let's work over toward the horses, which probably are being held by one of the Indians."

They rode west, protected by a small ridge, and ten minutes later pulled up to the top and looked again.

"Right below," said Paladin. "See that feathered brave, watching from under a manzanita?"

"Yes."

"He is just aiming with his rifle."

The rifle cracked, and Paladin said in a low voice, "The horses jumped a little when he fired. Their *mecates* are tied to his leg."

"He doesn't want them to get away."

Paladin smiled. "We'll both charge him, mounted. It's about two hundred yards, with the wind this way. I think you are about to see something interesting. It may be a little rough on the Indian, but they play rough themselves. Ready?"

"Ready!" Satterthwaite said, his voice taut with excitement.

Paladin slammed his heels into his horse's flanks. The horse bolted into the open and charged the Indian at a hard gallop. Paladin yelled, "Ya-hoo! Yahoo!" and fired his six-shooter in the air.

Satterthwaite was beside him, giving the British version of a yell, and fired his horse pistol.

The Indian on the ground rolled over to look, and saw them bearing down

on him. At that time the horses became frightened and bolted toward the prickly pear. The mecates jerked the Indian from under the manzanita and bounced him across the prairie toward the prickly pear.

Paladin continued to charge the horses. The Indian was having a bad time, trying to double up and get his hands on the ropes, but not having a chance to succeed before his rump would hit a beargrass bush or a stone and straighten him out.

"The bloody beggar will die!" shouted Satterthwaite.

Paladin smiled grimly. Somebody always had to die, it seemed. Sometimes it was somebody who deserved to die; more often, it seemed, the dying person was one who should have lived. But there was never time to stop to inquire whether a man deserved to live or die. He put himself in a position to shoot you, and the only defense was for you to shoot him first. Then he died, and not you. Perhaps your turn would come; until then, keep your pistol loaded.

All other shooting had stopped, and he knew the other four Indians were running through the brush, out of sight, trying to recapture their horses.

The poor devil at the end of the mecates was just entering the prickly pear clump, and he finally screamed. The horses had gone around it on both sides. They came together, pulled by their mecates' being tied at a common point, and headed for the creek. The Indian now was limp, being dragged like a bundle of brush. The lead horse went over a small step-off, followed by the other three. The Indian sailed high in the air and came down with his head on a rock. It sounded like a ripe watermelon dropped on an oyster-shell road, but it was loud—or seemed so— and Satterthwaite was white in the face.

"The poor devil got it!" he said as they slowed down.

Paladin looked to where the Indian's bloody body was still being shuttled through the rocks. The horses went on both sides of a willow tree, and the Indian's body hung up. Two of the mecates snapped, and the horses went free. The other two, momentarily checked, plunged ahead. The Indian's body whirled end over end, like a pin wheel. Then the mecates broke, and the other horses galloped off down the creek.

Satterthwaite wiped his brow with a red bandanna. "There ought to be an easier way to die," he said.

Paladin said, "There is. If he had not agreed to put on the stage-robbing act for a drink of poison whisky, he would still be in his jacal with his wives and children. But Indians don't think that far ahead. Neither do a lot of whites."

He led the way to the adobe building. A man came outside to greet them.

" 'Light," said the man, wiping his brow. "They had me in a tight spot."

Paladin dismounted. "Never mind. You're still alive." He studied the man, who was about fifty years old, a little portly, well-dressed, suave, rather good-looking without revealing character, and very courteous.

"I own the T Buggy Whip," said the man.

Paladin looked for Satterthwaite, but the Englishman, shocked over the killing of the Indian, had ridden off to examine the body. ' "Which way,"

asked Paladin, "is Santa Fe?"

"East," said the man. "Did you come from Albuquerque?"

"Yes."

"On the stage?"

Paladin's eyes widened. "We rode."

The man was studying the horses. "I don't see any familiar[1] brands."

"We traded for them down the road a ways," said Paladin.

The man smiled. "You saved my life, and I am questioning you. You must realize we question everybody in this country."

"Seems it might be a good idea," said Paladin, "if you can do it before they start shooting."

"If you gentlemen are going to Santa Fe," said the man, "you'll need fresh horses. Those look pretty worn."

"They've been used hard," said Paladin.

"Take two of mine."

"But you—"

"I'll send yours into town later. You leave mine at the La Fonda Hotel. They'll take care of them for me. They know fhese horses," he added.

If it was a warning, Paladin did not mind. "Perhaps we should see you safely home," he said.

The man smiled. "This was one chance in a million. I'll get home without trouble."

"Do you often have Indians on the warpath?" asked Satterthwaite, coming up.

The man smiled. "No wild Indians around here. Some **of these young braves got liquored up and wanted to** raise some **cain."**

"Their bullets make holes **too," Paladin** observed.

The man spoke up. "We have more company!"

Paladin stared. Over **the** hilltop from where they had observed the Indians, rode seven men on horseback. Paladin jumped off his horse. "We'll accept that offer of fresh horses," he said, "and don't mind if we hurry off. We seem to have somebody on our backtrail."

The man smiled. "I hope next time we meet under easier circumstances."

The two loan horses rode at an easy gallop. They were big, and covered a lot of ground.

Paladin said, over the drumming of hoofs, "I figured the owner of the T Buggy Whip might stop the outlaws— and he did."

Satterthwaite looked back. "They stopped at the line-rider's dwelling, and now they're talking."

"They didn't shake hands," Paladin observed. "They know one another."

Satterthwaite looked puzzled. "What does that mean?"

"It means the two men from San Francisco are pretty well known on the Buggy Whip—and **it** means also that we got out of there just in time."

Satterthwaite said, "If he's in with them, why did he let us go at all?"

"We had possibly saved his life—and there must be at least a modicum of gratefulness, even among outlaws."

Satterthwaite thought about it for a while. Then he observed, "He didn't tell you his name, did he?"

Paladin shook his head. "There was no reason for him to keep it a secret. Perhaps he is just not accustomed to giving out information to strangers."

5

And so they rode into Santa Fe, ancient, fabled city of the New World. With its Spanish-type, flat-roofed adobe buildings and its narrow, crooked streets, it was unlike any other **town** in **the United** States. Candles burned in the *santos;* bells pealed at dusk; and on every dwelling, a row of the butt ends of Cottonwood logs protruded about a foot at the place where an *anglo* house would have eaves. Paladin and Satterthwaite rode through the dry, dusty streets, taking in the sights and sounds and smells of a Mexican town—for Santa Fe had always been Mexican, and in the doorways, opening flush on the streets, were black-haired, lustrous-eyed girls, and scowling, black-mustached young Mexican boys.

Santa Fe was historically a town that was not receptive to the Yankees. It had too many memories of the traders who had started overland as early as 1790, who had come in a great flood when the Santa Fe Trail was blazed by William Becknell. Santa Fe had always been a target of invasion, from Coronado to the Spanish priests and soldiers, to the Pueblo Indians who reconquered the town and the country in a mighty, bloody revolt; to the Spaniards under de Vargas who finally drove the Indians back into the mountains; to the Mexican revolution, which meant little to Santa Fe but a change of governors; to the invasion of U.S. troops under Kearney.

Those were conquests with the power of organization behind them, but there were others, less organized but equally effective in the long run: the French *voyageurs* who came down from Canada and up from New Orleans; the British traders who came in from Guaymas on the west coast and Matamoros on the east; *anglo* freighters down the long trail from Independence; Irish adventurers who went on to Chihuahua; the Germans and the Prussians and the Texans—each of whom, in one fashion or another, left his mark on that strangely cosmopolitan but unchanging town.

They came, they saw, they conquered. And even when their intent was peaceful—as it usually was—they conquered the women of Santa Fe, and for that insult, the men of Santa Fe could not forgive them. So it was not unusual that the Mexicans, remembering the traders and the trappers and the mountain men and the muleskinners, and remembering wives and sweethearts who had turned up with fair-haired, blue-eyed offspring, would hone their knives and open fresh jugs of Paso brandy and get ready to give any newcomer a warm

reception.

"You can hardly blame them," said Paladin.

They rode around the plaza where the Santa Fe Trail freighters had unhitched their wagons, and rode into the livery yard at the La Fonda, another ancient landmark— the inn and hotel that dated back before Becknell or Sprague or Ewing Young or even Zebulon Pike.

The Mexican hostler glanced at their horses and said something under his breath. "I take care of them," he said, and Paladin gave him a two-bit piece.

They ate in a small patio, outdoors but not bothered by flies. Then Paladin went to the desk and asked about the office of the *Citizen.* Satterthwaite said he would try to find a way to take a bath, while Paladin went to the newspaper office, in a small adobe building between the hotel and the church.

The door was open, and he walked in. There was no sign on the door or the one window, but he had a glimpse of a press, and, once inside, the smell of printers' ink assured him he was in the right place before his eyes got adjusted to the dimness.

There was a small rolltop desk, a stack of exchanges in the corner, four feet high, a counter with a roll of paper and a big ball of twine in a round cast iron box hanging from the ceiling; a pot-bellied wood stove in the opposite corner, and a pile of mesquite roots nearby; two cases of type and two high stools; two imposing stones, a hand-turned Vaughn Ideal press, a Pearl jobber in one corner. The floor was littered with spoiled newsprint, wadded up and thrown away. At the back of the shop was a wooden pail of water and a clean crockery basin on a home-made bench, with a small stack of fresh newsprint next to the wash basin.

He stood there for a moment, liking the coolness of the building after the warmness of the sun. A small woman in a red dotted calico dress was on her knees, trying to gather up the discarded newsprint, and she had not heard him come in.

"Madam, may I help you?" he said, and walked over to her. She got up, her face flushed, her arms around a huge wad of paper. "I don't mind if you do," she said.

He swept it up quickly with his long arms, helped her carry it outside, and came back in and brushed off his hands. She took off her apron and hung it on a nail in the door. She was a pretty woman—dark brown hair, nice, friendly eyes.

"I take it you are Mrs. Marsh."

She nodded absently.

"I'm Paladin," he said. "You offered a reward for information on the whereabouts of your husband?"

"Paladin? Oh, you don't know how pleased I am! I didn't know where to reach you, so I put the notice in the paper, and I told everybody I saw that I hoped you would answer."

He smiled. "The news got around."

"Mr. Paladin, have a seat." She indicated a stool at the counter on which lay a thin stack of unfolded newspapers, while she herself sat in a cowhide chair before the littered desk.

Paladin said, "It looks as if you had trouble yesterday with the paper. It must have been press-day."

She sighed. "It's the first time I ever ran off the whole edition by myself," she said. "Two hundred and ten papers—and it took me all day."

"You say it's the first time. Had you had help before?"

"I had a Mexican printer, Miguelito. He was here when Joe—Mr. Marsh—was here, and Joe taught him how to set type and how to run the press."

"What happened to Miguelito?"

She said sadly, "About the same thing that happened to Joe. He ran away to join the filibusters. I tried to talk him out of it, but he went anyway." She looked up. "The word filibuster seems to have the magic sound of adventure for some men, Mr. Paladin. Why do you suppose they are so intrigued by it?"

"Hard to say." Paladin was conscious of her prettiness, and the fact that she was confiding in him like a little girl.

She shook her head. "I got the papers out—but it took all day—and I wasted a lot—and I haven't got them in the mail yet. I haven't even got them folded."

He asked, "Was Miguelito fond of Joe?"

"Perhaps he really went to find him—maybe to claim the reward."

"To find him, perhaps. He wouldn't want the money."

She was about twenty-five, he guessed, and quick-moving, energetic. "You received my letter?" he asked.

She looked blank for an instant, then glanced at a pile of mail on her desk. "Just came in on the stage. I haven't opened it." She looked through the letters. "Yes, here's the one from you. What a pretty seal on the envelope!"

He looked at his hands; they were black from handling the papers. "You used too much ink on the press."

"I did the best I knew how—but I had never paid much attention to mechanical things." She slit the envelope with a hatpin, and glanced at the enclosure. "Just a card," she said.

"I hope you're not disappointed, ma'am."

"Not since you're here. That's what I really wanted, you know. Everybody said that if anybody on earth could find Joe, Paladin could." She leaned forward. "And I believe them, Mr. Paladin. You have such an air of getting things done."

"Thank you, ma'am. Now—"

"But how did you happen to come so soon?"

"It was really simple," he said. "Everybody in the West seemed to be converging on Santa Fe, and I thought I'd better get here or be too late."

"Do you think you can find him?"

"I don't know enough about him yet. You offered a thousand-dollar

reward?"

"Isn't it enough?" she asked quickly.

He pushed his hat back on his head. "Seems plenty." He noted the meager equipment in the office. "It might be too much."

"That's my offer, and I will stick to it."

"How long has your husband been gone?"

"Ten months."

"I take it you're not sure where he went."

"He was quite mysterious about it, at the time."

"And you're not sure why he went?"

"I think I know."

"It wasn't because he wanted to get away from—this, was it?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so, Mr. Paladin. He loved the newspaper. He was enthusiastic about it. He was enthusiastic about everything."

"You and he had not had words before he left?"

She flushed. "No, sir. The only words we had were over his going. I stormed at him, I guess. He said I did, anyway. I cried, but it didn't do any good. He kissed me and left anyway."

"Now, then, ma'am, why exactly do you want to find him?"

She leaned forward, wide-eyed. "I love him, Mr. Paladin!"

He nodded slowly.

"Joe's all I ever had. My folks died when I was little, and I never really had any friends, and then Joe came along, and it's been Joe and me ever since. Nine years —it seems like a long time."

"Nine happy years?"

"As far as I know. Joe never complained."

"And so you want him back? Is there any other reason?"

"I'd like to clear his name, Mr. Paladin. Ugly things have been said about him."

"For instance?"

"That he left me to be an outlaw."

"Do you think it's possible?"

Her eyes flashed. "Not with Joe!"

"How about his property? Did he leave anything besides the printing office?"

"That's another thing, Mr. Paladin. Joe was an idealist and he thought more about what he wished things would be than what they were, but he was smart too. He left several pieces of property in Santa Fe—and now the law is handling them, and I don't think it's handling them right. They won't let me have anything to say about it."

"Do you think the law is dissipating your husband's property?"

She hesitated. "That's hard to say, but I know they won't listen to me and they won't let me know what's happening. The property was all in Joe's name, and I can't have anything to say. It would be different if I could either get him

back, or—" She stopped.

"Or establish a legal presumption of death," he said.

She nodded, her eyes red.

"Is that all, then?"

"There's one more thing you might as well know," she said. "A rancher, Tom Whipple, says he has news of Joe's death, and has asked me to marry him."

Thinking of what she had first said about Joe, he asked: "Are you in love with Whipple?"

"No, I don't think so. He's kind, and I like him, and I suppose I could get to love him. If I knew that Joe would not be coming back—"

"You're not in a hurry to get married, are you?'

She went back for a drink of water from the tin dipper. "I'm not in a hurry, Mr. Paladin, but Tom Whipple has been insistent."

"And you consider him a good catch?"

"He's nice—and he's rich. I could do worse."

"And a good reputation?"

She flared up. "Mr. Paladin, I did not ask you here to pry into my private affairs!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Marsh, but there are things I have to know." He looked straight at her. "Is Tom Whipple putting up the money for the reward?"

She looked at him, and he did not know what was indicated by the flatness of her voice when she said: "Do you care, Mr. Paladin, where the money comes from, as long as it is paid you when you do the job?"

He said thoughtfully, "I might. Let me understand one thing: you are offering the money for knowledge of Joe Marsh's whereabouts, not necessarily for his return."

"I'd like to have him back," she said slowly.

"If I find him, I will try to get him back," said Paladin. "But in case I should find him and he would not come back—?"

She nodded. "I will pay the reward, Mr. Paladin."

He got up from the stool. "And there is always the possibility that something has happened to Joe, and he would be unable to come back," he reminded her.

She looked at him and bit her lip. "I know. I've had only one letter, and that was months ago."

"Where was it mailed?"

"It was dated at Guaymas, Mexico."

"Guaymas!"

She was immediately alert. "Do you know something about Guaymas?"

"I've heard of it."

"When will you start looking for him?"

"Now—today." He looked around the shop. "Do you have a typesetter, Mrs. Marsh?"

She shook her head.

He smiled. "You have one now."

"You won't—"

"You'll need a hand here for a couple of days, because there's a paper to get out next week, and Miguelito has heard the *grito* and has gone to fight for the land of his fathers. There is more to it, though. I want to be around town for a while with my ears open. I may learn things I would not hear by asking directly. And I have a hunch, ma'am, that there's more here than the simple fact of a man's going to Mexico. Others may know things you don't know—about Joe, about his connection with other persons, about what he intended to do. It's no reflection, Mrs. Marsh, but nobody knows all about any one person—and that applies to wives and husbands."

She moistened her lips. "All right, Mr. Paladin, I will leave it up to you."

"I will start by helping you get the papers in the post office," he said.

"We have to fold the papers and mail the single wraps."

"Fine. I'll just roll up my gun-belt and put it on top of your desk." He found a place for it, and went back to the stool. He folded one paper over from the left and matched the corners, then ripped it with the cutter—a piece of beeswaxed twine, tied at the opposite side of the counter, and held across the papers by a square nail tied to the loose end. He dropped the nail, doubled the paper again, creased it, folded it again and creased, and had a quarter-size paper.

She said, "You do that like an old hand."

He smiled. "I've done it before," he said.

He went back to folding, reading the paper as he did so. In a moment he looked up. "Tom Whipple is advertising Black Angus heifers for early delivery," he said.

"I told you he was a rancher."

"Black Angus," he repeated.

"I suppose he has them to sell."

"It seems strange," he said. "I have not seen any Black Angus at all in the country."

After they finished the single-wraps, she suggested he leave the rest of the folding, and start typesetting some legal notices. "It's all six-point," she said, "and I don't know when I would ever get them up."

He worked steadily for three hours, while Mrs. Marsh worked at the desk. Then he locked up almost a galley of type, got a strip of paper and wet it, found a proof planer and mallet, and took a proof.

She came back when she heard the mallet. "It looks splendid," she said.

"Does the lawyer want to see a proof?"

"Yes. That's Howard Jackson."

"I'll take it," he said. "It will give me a chance to talk to him."

"He's just off the plaza on the south side, near the palace of the governors."

He ran into Satterthwaite at the corner by the hotel. "Fascinating town," said

the Englishman. "I'm just going up to look at the church. Want to go along?"

"I'm busy now," said Paladin.

He crossed the plaza in the steady sunlight. Half a dozen little brown-skinned Mexican boys ran and played in the dirt, and a fat Mexican mother sat on a tree stump and held a bright-eyed baby on her capacious lap. Paladin found Howard Jackson's office and gave him the proof.

Jackson was a rather portly, florid-faced man who chewed on a dead cigar. He took the proof, and looked up at Paladin. "New here?"

"Yes."

"I take it you're helping Mrs. Marsh on the paper."

"Yes."

Jackson scrutinized him. "You don't look like a tramp printer."

"I might say I am a printer, however."

"You look more like a gunfighter to me."

"I have done that too," said Paladin.

"Lot of men come out till things cool off back home."

"Sounds likely," said Paladin. "What do you know about Joe Marsh?"

"Did business with him." Jackson chewed on his cigar. "You interested?"

"Mrs. Marsh is very distressed over his disappearance."

Jackson examined his cigar. "Don't know why she should be."

"Meaning Tom Whipple?"

Jackson stared at him. "For a man just come to town, you know a hell of a lot."

"What does Whipple do—besides ranch?"

Jackson scowled. "Tom Whipple is not a client of mine," he said. "I could hardly tell you anything about him."

"What kind of cows does Whipple run?" asked Paladin.

"Whiteface, I suppose."

"No Angus?"

"Not as far as I know."

Paladin got out a cigar. "Have one?"

Jackson shook his head. "Can't smoke. Doc won't let me.

"I understand Joe Marsh has considerable property," said Paladin.

"Not considerable," said Jackson, leaning back. "He left some. The best piece is the newspaper."

"That doesn't look like much," said Paladin.

"It's a fooler. Santa Fe is the county seat and the capital of the territory, and there's quite a fair amount of printing here, also quite a lot of legal notices, since, to be tonest, the *Citizen* is the only paper in the territory."

"Do you think Joe Marsh made a living at it?"

"More than a living—and that's not all." Jackson leaned forward. "There'll be some big tracts of land opened to homesteading in the next few years, and the *Citizen* will be a regular mint, what with final proofs, mortgages, foreclosures, and all. I tell you, that Joe Marsh is no fool."

Paladin looked at his cigar. "What was Joe like personally?"

"Splendid fellow! A little older than the Mrs. A visionary and impractical as hell, but somehow he had a native shrewdness that always pulled him through, and he never failed to come out ahead."

"He was an idealist, would you say?"

Jackson thought the question over. "An idealist, yes. Visionary, yes. Anything but conservative. But when the cards were on the table, he invariably showed a lot of common sense."

Paladin looked out at the boys playing in the plaza. "Does that apply to his going to Mexico?"

"I don't know." Jackson shook his head. "He's been gone quite a while."

"One other thing: Mrs. Marsh is worried about the

court's handling of her property. Do you know about that?"

"I represent Joe Marsh, I haven't been engaged specifically for that, but I handled his affairs when he was here, and the court appointed me." He looked weary. "Like most women, Mrs. Marsh believes the property is being mishandled, but I can assure you it is not. The judge is elderly and conservative, and the property is not being dissipated. It is our intention to keep it intact for Joe's return, or for delivery to the widow if he is discovered to be dead."

"I may as well say that Mrs. Marsh has hired me to find Joe or get news of him. I should have said it before."

Jackson was not astonished. "I knew something was up. The questions you asked were not the questions of a printer. Are you Paladin, then?"

Paladin smiled.

"I heard you mentioned a while back. Well, Paladin, Mrs. Marsh is a fine woman, a pleasant woman, and she adores Joe Marsh. She was everything a wife is supposed to be—and I know, because I played poker with Joe for six years, and believe me, a man soon finds out what another man thinks about his wife. No, I reckon she just wants Joe back."

"Why would he voluntarily disappear for a,year?"

"I don't know the answer to that."

"How about Joe and Tom Whipple?"

Jackson inspected his cigar stub closely. "Let's say that Joe got under Whipple's skin with his newspaper and his harping on rifle-running to Mexico and all."

"Did they have words?"

"Two or three times—but it never came to violence. Neither one carried a gun, and I doubt either would go looking for a shooting match."

"Could it be possible that Whipple finally got tired of Joe's needling him, or even embarrassed, and had him done away with?"

Jackson squirmed, "I doubt foul play. Whipple is a quiet man, a man of whom it is easy to be suspicious, and a man mixed up in many things—but I doubt he would have another man killed."

"Do you have any ideas?"

Jackson shook his head. "Out of my line." He looked up. "I take it Mrs. Marsh wants him back pretty badly."

"She is offering a thousand dollars."

Jackson looked up quickly. "Maybe I better quit practicing law and start being a detective," he said.

6

Paladin walked along the porch of the governors' palace —a long, low, one-story building of adobe—and stopped in at the Toro Bravo Saloon. He bought a drink of *aguardiente* with a silver dollar, and pushed the change back across the mahogany counter. "Know why Joe Marsh would leave the country?" he asked.

The bartender pocketed the change. "With a wife like mine—yes. With a wife like his—no. He'll never do no better—not even in Mexico."

"Then where is he?"

"That's a hard question to answer. Mrs. Marsh is offering a thousand dollars for the answer."

"I'm trying to collect the thousand dollars. I'm Paladin."

"So you're Paladin. Well, you look like you could be him, all right. Have one on the house."

He poured one for Paladin and one for himself, and leaned over the bar. "The talk is that he went to Mexico to join some filibusters."

Paladin listened. "Isn't that a girl crying?"

The bartender was disdainful. "That's Carmen. She was Miguelito's sweetheart, and he left day before yesterday without telling her nothing."

Paladin looked into the dim corner of the room. "She has friends already."

"Yeah, but she won't be any good until she gets through slobbering over Miguelito."

"Does anybody know where Miguelito went?"

The bartender shrugged. "They come. They go. Me, I stay. I have a fat wife and eight kids that never get their bellies full." He shrugged again. 'They come. They go." He looked thoughtful. "Maybe Carmen does know. I never ast her." He leaned on the counter. "Carmen! A gentleman wishes to buy you a drink." He whispered to Paladin. "She drinks tequila. It's two-bits a glass."

"All right."

Carmen was a short girl but well formed in the right places. Her hair was blue-black, her eyes black, and her lips red. Her white blouse was half off her shoulders, and she showed signs of tears. But she looked at Paladin, and her eyes brightened. "Senor, you would buy me a drink?"

"It would be my pleasure, sefiorita."

The bartender poured a clear fluid into a dirty glass. She took a piece of

lemon from a tin plate, poured a tea-spoonful of salt in the crotch between her left thumb and forefinger, and picked up the glass. *"Salud,* senor," she said, and tossed the tequila down. She touched her tongue to the salt, and then sucked at the lemon.

Paladin said cautiously, "I want to find out where Miguelito has gone."

"Miguelito!" Her black eyes flashed fire. *"Caramba! Que hijo de cabron!* I will spit on him!" And she spat across the room on the wall about knee-high.

Paladin nodded at the bartender, who filled her glass. She picked it up and tossed it down, licked the salt and the lemon, and then turned to Paladin. "You want him, senor? He has maybe committed murder or robbed a bank, and you want him to hang by the neck until he is dead?"

Paladin smiled. For a little girl, she had a lot of fury.

"I'm not interested in hanging him—"

"A million curses! Why not! He *deserves* to hang! He has a too-short neck anyway. I tell you—"

Paladin kept still. She was a nice armful, but maybe Miguelito had known what he was doing. He would try once more. "Do you know where he went?"

"He has told me nothing. If he had, I would tell you where he went so you could hang him!"

"Carmenita," said a familiar voice, "is this man bothering you?"

Paladin turned. The two men who had been sitting with Carmen were coming into the light. Paladin said, "I just want to ask her a question, but I guess—" Then he stopped, for they were the two men from San Francisco. Paladin stared at them. The big one stopped a foot away from him, his gloved thumbs in his belt. Paladin did not move back, but raised one foot and put it on the brass rail. "Who are you?" he asked.

"You never asked that before," said the big man.

"I never cared. You were a mouse, a flea, a cockroach. But here in Santa Fe you know everybody. As long as you know who I am, I suppose I must find out who you are."

The big man sneered. "Tell him, Frankie."

The bartender hesitated.

Carmen put one arm around him. "Felip'l" she said. "The *gran* Felip'!"

The big man thrust her out of his way. "Tell him."

The bartender said, "Three-Finger Phil."

For a moment, Paladin stood motionless. Three-Finger Phil Williams, the filibuster. It was hardly possible, for Three-Finger's hand—and yet Miss Armendariz had been unduly amused at the sight of the hand in the jar. Paladin began to gather himself, for he knew what was coming. "Three-Finger Phil," he said softly.

Phil said, "You don't like the name?"

Paladin said, "If I were a cat, I would cover you with dirt."

Phil exploded. He leaped for Paladin's throat, but Paladin wasn't there. He came in on Phil from behind, hammering at the back of his neck. Then the

Mexican got into the fight, and Paladin had to back away, for the Mexican had a knife.

Carmen watched, her eyes wide. Paladin slid back, avoiding a thrust, watching Phil get his balance as he stood up alongside the bar. Paladin felt a chair behind him, and reached for it, brought it in front of him with one hand, and smashed it on the dirt floor.

"Manuel!" said Three-Finger Phil. "Leave him alone! He's my meat!"

Paladin picked up the chair, wrenched a leg loose, and started in to attack. Phil dropped back. A six-shooter appeared in his hand, but Paladin crowded him and knocked it out of his hand. It clattered on the floor and lay there.

Phil got him in a bear-hug, but Paladin threw him off. Manuel was still circling with his knife in his hand, and Paladin had to keep the man away from his back. Phil drew his second pistol, and Paladin threw the chairleg into his stomach and closed again. He got the pistol and started to turn on Manuel, for Phil was gasping for breath and would be out of the fight for a moment, when he felt a hard jar at the back of his head, and felt his knees loosen, and barely was able to stand. Carmen seemed to be wavering in his sight; the bartender was polishing a glass. Paladin tried to turn, but his leg gave away, and the pistol dropped from his fingers as he went down.

He heard Three-Finger Phil say wheezily, "Don't kill him! I want to work him over." He felt the chair leg across his shoulders. Then Phil raised him to his feet and threw a glass of whisky in his face. "Come on, let's see if you can fight!"

Paladin stalled for a few seconds, trying to get his legs under him, while Phil hit him in the face again and again. Manuel kicked him from behind, and laid the chair leg across his back again and again while Phil battered his face. Paladin got one hand on Phil's nose and twisted hard. Blood spurted from it, but Phil only became more brutal. Time after time he slugged Paladin in the face.

"Won't he never go down?" he shouted hoarsely.

Paladin kicked him once in the crotch, but it was no use. Phil roared and came back at him, and Paladin's head snapped back on a limber neck, and Paladin slid to the floor, and the last thing he remembered was Carmen sucking the piece of lemon, her black eyes as big as a man's fist. . . .

He came to on the dirt walkway outside, with the bartender holding him up, and Carmen trying to give him a drink of brandy.

"Senor, you look verree bad!" she said.

"You need a doctor," said the bartender.

"I will show you the way," said Carmen, and took his hand as he got painfully to his feet, and put her arm around him until he got his balance. She was surprisingly strong. /

He dismissed her at the doctor's office and sent her back with a dollar for tequila. She wanted to wait, but he forbade it.

Dr. Lawrence was a very tall man who seemed about to cave in. He said,

"Well, mister, it looks like you were lying face up in the middle of a stampede."

"Something like that."

"Pretty good fight, eh?"

"A little one-sided. Otherwise it was good enough."

"This will hurt like all get-out," said the doctor, opening a bottle of alcohol and wadding up a white cloth.

"I guess it can't be helped."

"I'll have to clean out those cuts. Otherwise you're almost sure to have infection."

"Go ahead."

At the first touch of the cloth, he groaned, but the doctor kept rubbing. The alcohol burned unceasingly, and first the blood rushed to Paladin's head; then it seemed to flow completely away, and finally he lost consciousness, and did not come to until the doctor started sewing his face together.

"Take about twenty stitches," he said. "Who did it?"

"A couple of fellows in the saloon."

"Don't want to tell, eh?"

"It's no secret."

""You're Paladin, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You hunting Joe Marsh?"

"That's what I came here for."

"You better look where Joe Marsh is, hadn't you?"

Paladin grunted as the needle went in. "Suits me fine. Where is he?"

The doctor tied a knot in the silk thread. "If I knew, I would go after the thousand dollars."

"Paladin!" It was Satterthwaite's voice. "Mr. Paladin!"

"I'm here," said Paladin.

Satterthwaite came into his view. "Paladin, I just saw the girl in the saloon, and she told me where to find you. I have news, Paladin! Important news!"

"I cannot do other than listen," said Paladin.

"The two men from San Francisco are in town!"

Paladin said dryly, "I suspected as much. They have just finished giving me a beating."

Satterthwaite stared, and for the first time realized what was happening. "Oh, I say now, Paladin. What's happened here?"

"These men play mean," said Dr. Lawrence.

"My goodness!" said Satterthwaite. » "Do you know who Manuel is?" asked Paladin.

"A former rustler who served three years in the territorial prison."

Dr. Lawrence was studying Paladin's face. "You look like the under side of an embroidered pillow case done in the dark. You'll have to pull at those threads a little each day until they come out. Otherwise, if you're lucky, you

may live. Provided you haven't got a ruptured kidney from that chair leg."

Paladin said to Satterthwaite: "See if you can find out who has an idea as to where Joe Marsh is or where Mi-guelito went."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go back to the *Citizen* office and get up a little more type."

"Does your face hurt?"

"My whole head is one big burning ache. Otherwise, I'm fine, and I'll see you at the La Fonda tonight if you don't start asking questions of Carmen."

"I ought to put some dressings on your face," said the doctor, "but you would scare people to death. Perhaps the open air is as good as anything. It's seven thousand feet here, and the air is dry and comparatively free of contaminating influences."

Paladin put his hat on carefully. "Then I take it you consider Three-Finger Phil an upright citizen."

Lawrence looked at the floor. "Occasionally," he admitted, "a skunk gets in the chicken pen."

7

Paladin walked slowly across the plaza, with Satterthwaite accompanying him as far as the hotel. The small boys stared at Paladin and ceased talking and began to back away. He went on to the *Citizen* office and stepped into the cool dimness. Mrs. Marsh was talking to the man on the T Buggy Whip.

Mrs. Marsh said, "Paladin, this is Mr. Whipple."

"Haven't I seen you before?" asked Whipple.

"On your ranch, when the Indians were after your horses."

"Yes, of course." He paused. "I regret to see that you have had an accident."

Paladin nodded.

"Mrs. Marsh and I were just discussing the probable course you will take in trying to locate her husband."

Paladin did not like the smug look on Whipple's face. He said, "I wish I knew. It seems to be unpopular to ask questions in Santa Fe."

Mrs. Marsh said primly, "Paladin, you will have to understand that I do not allow drinking or fighting in this shop."

Paladin said, "How well, Mr. Whipple, do you know "the men who came up behind us on the T Buggy Whip?"

"It is hard to say." Whipple shrugged, his eyes watching Paladin's. "I know many persons."

"Meaning that you do not want to say."

Whipple shrugged; he was still maddeningly sure of himself. "I know some persons well, others not as well." He raised his head. "We can be friends, Paladin. You have done me a good turn, and I am not inclined to forget it."

"Would it be the same," Paladin asked, "for a bad turn?"

Whipple said coolly, "I have a long memory in any circumstances."

Paladin went back and hung his hat on a corner of the type case. He heard Whipple say that he must go along.

Mrs'. Marsh came back and stood beside him. "I'm sorry for what I said about fighting, Paladin. You have been severely cut up, and you must have gotten it by asking about Joe."

He looked down at her. Yes, she was sorry; no doubt about it. He forgave her. "How about Joe and Tom?" he asked. "Was there bad blood between them, and if so, how much?"

She was thoughtful. "Joe was always saying something about rifles, and hinting that Tom had something to do with it. Of course Tom did not—he told me so himself— but Joe gave him some bad moments, I think."

"Did Joe ever offer any proof of anything?"

"He said that rifles were being sent to Mexico at exorbitant prices from this area, and that he had the documentary proof. He never mentioned Tom by name, but he spoke often of the Bullwhip Ranch—which everyone knew meant the T Buggy Whip."

"And that, of course, called the attention of the United States to the fact that it was being done. Didn't Joe want the revolutionaries to have rifles?"

She chose her words with care. "Joe believed in Mexico for Mexicans, and he thought the government at Mexico City was too far away, and not sympathetic with the people of Northern Mexico. But Joe's way would not be to run rifles and profit from their misfortune, Mr. Paladin. Joe's way would be to go to Mexico and help them, organize them, fight with them."

"He knew how to do that?" asked Paladin.

She said earnestly, "He was a very capable man, Mr." Paladin. He was with Mosby's Raiders during the war. He doesn't mind hardships; he can direct troops; he can fight hand-to-hand—and he will fight hard for a cause."

Paladin said, "I'm glad he is not on my trail."

"I'll tell you something about Joe, Mr. Pal—"

She stopped as a man stepped in the door. He was slight of build, leathery of skin, wore a huge black mustache, and had the mark of the trail stamped on him. His vest hung open, loose, with a tobacco sack tag from one pocket, and above it a nickel-plated star. He looked at Paladin, taking him in with a quick head-to-toe glance, then at Mrs. Marsh. "I'm Wayne Lincomb, ma'am, U. S. marshal out of El Paso. I come up here to investigate some reports of rifles going to Mexico without a permit."

Mrs. Marsh smiled. "We always hear those reports, Mr. Lincomb."

Lincomb turned to Paladin. "I haven't run across you before, mister."

"I'm Paladin, San Francisco."

Lincomb nodded. "Heard about you. Private detective, sort of."

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you want to get in my way any more than I do in yours. It might be we can even help each other out once in a while."

"Glad to," said Paladin, well aware that lawmen as a rule did not care for private detectives.

"Mrs. Marsh," said Lincomb, "mind if I look through the files of the *Citizen* for the last year or so?"

"Of course not."

Lincomb glanced at the open copies of the paper, still unfolded, lying on the counter. The upper sides, that were visible now, were "patent" insides, printed in Kansas City, but one fold would reveal Tom Whipple's ad offering Black Angus heifers. Paladin, however, said nothing.

Mrs. Marsh indicated a small stack of quarter-folded papers. "They haven't been bound for this volume, of course."

"All right, ma'am. I'll just sit down here at the counter, if you don't mind, and look them over."

"You know that Mr. Marsh has—gone away?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Right sorry, too. It was his editorials that made the State Department sit up and take notice. You ever hear from him?"

"Several months ago."

"I'll be glad to keep an eye out for him, Mrs. Marsh." He sat down on the stool.

"Do you think—if Mr. Marsh joined the revolutionaries —is that illegal, Mr. Lincomb?"

"No, ma'am, not as far as we are concerned. It's only when a force of men is organized this side of the border. That's a violation of law and treaty."

Paladin said, "Do you think rifles are going through Santa Fe?"

Lincomb looked at him keenly. "We *know* they are, Mr. Paladin. They go from the East down to New Orleans, and then up the Red, but they disappear from the river somewhere below Fort Towson. Except for the factories, all the names are fictitious, and we can't trace the men—but we have found some of these rifles as far south as Guaymas. Now the problem is to find how they get there."

"What part does Guaymas play in the scheme of things?"

"For years," said Lincomb, crossing his legs on the stool, "Guaymas has been a center of activity. It's a good port, a long way from Mexico City, and controls the west half of Northern Mexico because of its ship-loading facilities and the roads leading north and south. Some trails go east over the mountains—but not many."

Paladin considered. The picture was shaping up. It was obvious that finding Joe Marsh was more than a missing person assignment; he would tangle with filibusters, illegal gun-runners, insurrectionists, and possibly federal troops. The project might seriously complicate his health.

Lincomb opened the first paper and spread it out, then looked up at Paladin. "You been dragged through the *malpms* on your face?"

"It was bad country, all right," said Paladin, but offered no further comment. "What is the penalty for gun-running?" he asked.

"It can be severe—depending on how the Mexican government feels about it, and on what kind of a passport a man has."

"Does a passport make a difference?"

"Sure. You get in trouble and flash a British passport, and for some reason Mexican officials start bowing and scraping."

"It's worth knowing," said Paladin.

"The worst of it is," Lincomb went on as he turned the pages, "these rifles are generally not used to fight for freedom. A revolutionary leader or a filibuster from this country gets some money behind him, gets hold of some arms, and organizes a campaign, but he never goes far enough to constitute a serious threat to the government of Mexico."

"Some have," said Paladin.

"For every one that got anywhere at all, a hundred or a thousand have failed because the leaders never had the idea of fighting for freedom in the first place. Mostly they are looking for adventure or loot."

"And find it," said Paladin.

Lincomb nodded. "He captures a few towns and maybe some churches with a few cases of silver and gold plate, or a government warehouse with tobacco or a few strong-boxes of gold bullion, and that's the end. They stop to split up the proceeds, and they take to drinking and fighting over the women—begging your pardon, Mrs. Marsh—and the revolution—if there ever was any—falls through. In a couple of days the government soldiers come back under a new general, and the rebels, disorganized and too drunk to care, start running for cover." He shook his head. "The result is that innocent people are killed and wounded; all rich people are robbed unless they contribute heavily to the winning side—sometimes both sides—women are abused by the hundreds, and a few more men die before a firing squad. Generally, too, both sides hang a few men from the other side, just to show they mean business." He looked at Mrs. Marsh, who was pretty sober. "If Mr. Marsh is with some filibusters around Guaymas, ma'am, 1 hope he takes care of himself."

Paladin asked, "You have some more copy, ma'am?" He liked working at the case—although it had been a long time.

Mrs. Marsh said, "Doesn't your face hurt?" "Some," said Paladin, "but it would hurt just as much if I were lying in a hammock."

She gave him a number of pieces of copy clipped from other newspapers, and a few pages written in pencil, in a neat round handwriting that seemed curiously to fit her personality. He went back, got on the stool, picked up a composing stick, and got to work. The dull clicking of the type in the stick began to soothe the turmoil in his brain, and presently he was able to think. It seemed obvious that if he intended to save loe Marsh—rather than just find out about him—he had better do it as soon as possible, not only to preserve Joe Marsh's life but also, perhaps, his own—for he was well aware that the beating by Three-Finger Phil and Manuel was only a preliminary. Somebody above them was giving the orders, and they would not kill him until they were

told to do so. They could make life difficult in the meantime, however. The unknown factor was: when would the top man lift the restraint? When would he decide that Paladin should be killed?

There was also one slight additional question: who was the top man?

Paladin's fingers worked busily as thoughts raced through his mind. He filled the stick with type, dumped it, and started on the second. He hung his first piece of copy on the hook at the side of the case. It would be two days before the stage would leave for Tucson, which was on the route to Guaymas, and since Mrs. Marsh had no seeming possibility of getting out the paper alone, he could be useful in the meantime. Also, it gave him a chance to think things over, and it allowed him to be around until the first shell of resistance should soften and people begin to talk more freely.

He finished a line, and turned the stick to read it over before spacing it out. He read the line, and then, startled, read the entire stickful and the one before:

"From the *Aha California;* Miss Maria Rosa Ar-mendariz, native of Brazil and celebrated as an actress on three continents, , will move her troupe next week to Santa Fe, N.M.T., where they will resume the historic triumph which they enjoyed at the Bella Union Melodeon here. It may be observed in passing that Miss Armendafiz will not soon give Mrs. Kean any great concern for her laurels as an actress, but as an *entertainer* Miss Armendariz literally brought down the house, to the extent that it is rumored the management of the Bella Union, about which never a word of narrow-mindedness has been uttered, is able to breathe a sigh of relief. The theater was packed at every performance, but it sometimes took all the next day to get it ready for the next show.

At the first performance of *Maud's Peril!* Miss Armendariz accidentally (?) lost her gown on stage, and for a moment stood forth in all her pristine beauty as a woman, before she realized that she was covered by nothing more than the statutes, and retired hastily but—an unkind dowager has pointed out—not in confusion. The police observed the show the following day, and offered the suggestion that if Miss Armendariz believed there was any danger of losing her gown again, some deference to the laws of the city would suggest that she clothe herself with suitable undergarments. In view of such happenings, the view here is that the sleepy old village of Santa Fe is due for an awakening. *Bon voyage,* ye treaders of the footlighted boards! May fresh histrionic triumphs await you in the fabled city of the Spanish *conquistadores!"*

Paladin stared at the type for a moment. Miss Armen-dariz was to be in Santa Fe! He had not the slightest doubt that Miss Armendariz's unfortunate accident on stage had been carefully pre-arranged—and the whole affair threw an interesting sidelight on the character of that young lady. Perhaps he had been in too big a hurry to leave San Francisco.

However, she was soon to be in Santa Fe, and his more immediate concern was over her reason for coming to a small town, hardly more than a village in spite of its long and dramatic history, which probably did not even have a place that could truthfully be called a theater.

It seemed rather obvious that the connection between her and Three-Finger Phil was not to be ignored.

He finished the item in some thought, hooked it, and went on to the ri'ext, also from the San Francisco newspaper:

> "Museum Loses Relic—Last night a non-discriminating thief pilfered the preserved right hand of Three-Finger Phil from the Miners' Museum, where it has been on display for the morbidly curious. It is hard to know why anyone would want a. disembodied hand. It is of no more use to Phil Williams, since his body months ago formed a meal for the wolves on No Water Mesa."

Was it possible, Paladin wondered, that Miss Armen-dariz was bringing the hand with her, for exhibition? It would seem she had other attractions that would not require a dead man's hand to draw a crowd. Who, then, had stolen the hand, and why? Miss Armendariz had shown undue interest in the hand—amused interest, he recalled —and she would soon be in Santa Fe. The supposed Three-Finger Phil was already there; Paladin and Sat-terthwaite were there. About the only one missing was Heyboy, he thought dryly.

Lincomb folded his last paper and laid it neatly on the stack she had given him. "Is there any trail," he asked, "from here to the border, that does not follow the Rio Grande?"

Mrs. Marsh shook her head. "I think you should ask Dr. Lawrence about that. He has been here a long time— he came before the Kearny invasion, even—and has traveled all over the country horseback. He would know if anybody does. In fact," she said, "Dr. Lawrence knows everything that goes on in New Mexico."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Lincomb. "I'll have a talk with him."

Paladin looked up. That slight conversation threw some light on his problem. The question of Three-Fingar Phil's identity. Was the man from San Francisco actually Three-Finger Phil, as he claimed? At the moment, beaten and battered, weary in mind and body, Paladin could not seem to think why the man's real identity was important, but he knew it instinctively.-

Mrs. Marsh said she was going back to work after supper, and Paladin thought he probably-would do so also. He went to the La Fonda and looked himself over. It wasn't quite as bad as it felt, though bad enough. Satter-thwaite came in and lay down on the bed. "I should have been there to give you a hand."

"You should have given me a strong back and a stove poker," said Paladin.

"I *am* sorry, old fellow, I really am. I'm afraid you move too fast for me. You're into one fight before the last one's cold."

Paladin grimaced with pain. " '. . . the time of life is short! To spend that shortness basely were too long, If life did ride upon a dial's point, Still ending at the arrival of an hour.'"

"It makes me think of the slaughter at the Coliseum in Rome."

"It makes *me* think there will be a day of accounting," said Paladin, pulling at a thread.

He went across the plaza to the doctor's office. The fat Mexican woman was there with her six children, and they had infested the place and were looking at everything and chattering like magpies. The doctor got them outside and said crossly to Paladin: "I fixed you up this afternoon—and I don't like to be late for my supper."

Paladin chuckled. "If you'd get rid of that skeleton in the corner, the children wouldn't be so fascinated by your office."

The doctor said gruffly, "What do you want?"

"Do you know Three-Finger Phil—or rather, did you know the original Three-Finger?"

"Not personally."

"Did you never dress a wound for him?"

The doctor shook his head. "Three-Finger seldom got hurt. When he did, he fixed it himself."

"Was he actually killed in California?"

"I have no idea."

"Joe Marsh knew him and liked him. Was Three-Finger really a Robin Hood?"

The doctor's mouth turned down sourly. "He had moments, I've heard, when he gave something away to somebody needy, but don't be deluded. Like all outlaws, Three-Finger was a thief, a robber, a rapist, a murderer. Maybe Joe Marsh did like him, but Joe Marsh, like I said, was an idealist. He might have seen some characteristic of Three-Finger that he admired, and that might have blinded him to Three-Finger's faults."

Paladin asked thoughtfully, "Was there a woman?"

"Legend." The doctor snorted. "He was supposed to have a respectable legal wife who helped him out by representing him in cities, and so on—but nobody ever saw her, and nobody knew who she was." He sat back in his chair, finally resigned to being questioned. "Three-Finger himself was always coming and going, sometimes disappearing for long periods. Some said he was in California, some in Mexico. Joe Marsh might have known, but he didn't tell."

Paladin said, "Have a cigar?"

"Don't mind if I do," the doctor said in a lighter tone. "Used to chew on the ranch, but now I'm doctoring, a man can't chew around women. Looks too filthy."

"If this man who tried to slaughter me in the saloon is Three-Finger," said Paladin, "whose hand was in the jar in San Francisco?"

The doctor puffed a smoke ring toward the ceiling. "It's hard, sometimes, to know the identity of men beyond the law, because it is to their benefit to keep it hidden as much as possible, as you well know. I've lived in New Mexico for sixty-five years, and I've known a lot of outlaws. We had a ranch down in the Mogollons, and it was fine for outlaws. I found out that a good many are not known by sight to any but their closest henchmen, and as a result we are seldom sure that we *have* got an outlaw. It's only when some fool gets full of liquor and goes to a photographer and has his picture taken, that we can really identify a man like that." He rolled the cigar in his fingers. "I would not be sure that this man in Santa Fe is or is not Three-Finger. This man might be somebody who has taken Phil Williams' place and is trading on his reputation."

"Where does the mysterious woman come in?"

"She was supposedly the original Three-Finger's wife. You still hear about her, and I suppose if you could run her down and get her to tell the truth, she would know whether this is Three-Finger."

"Is it certain that the original Phil had lost a finger?"

"That seems fairly sure. The sheriff at Pueblo shot his finger off in a gun-fight. They found it later, and I understand it's still in formaldehyde up there."

Paladin began to feel relaxed in the doctor's presence. "Do you think he was killed eventually?"

The doctor looked at him levelly. "An outlaw leads a hazardous life, but Three-Finger-—no, I don't. If he had been killed in an open battle, yes—but in a private fight somewhere—I doubt it. Three-Finger was too shrewd, too wary. Of course it might have been done by treachery." He looked absently at the skeleton. "No, I don't think that is Phil's hand in the museum. I don't know whose it is, but I doubt that it is Phil's."

"Can you name anybody who might want to take his place?" asked Paladin.

The doctor leaned forward. "Anybody who might want to use his reputation to spread among the people or to impress anybody with whom he is dealing."

Paladin observed, "If Three-Finger is officially dead, anybody who assumes his place will have a year or two of comparative immunity until the government starts after him in earnest." He asked, "Who would be able to identify the real Three-Finger Phil?"

The doctor's eyelids lowered. "Anybody's guess."

"I will guess Tom Whipple."

The doctor looked at him. "You have a reputation for good guessing."

"How about the talk that Joe Marsh turned outlaw?"

The doctor snorted. "Bosh! Those things are said, but not by anybody who knows Joe Marsh."

Paladin got up. "Have a good supper, doctor."

"Do my damnedest," the doctor grumbled. "Two little Mexican girls about due to bring forth tonight. Have to get a nap. Sometimes the young ones have a hard time."

"Thanks, doc."

He found Satterthwaite, had a couple of drinks, ate supper, and felt better. They sat in the patio and smoked a cigar; the sun was still high in the western sky.

"I made the acquaintance of Miss Carmen," said Satterthwaite, "but I am a little dubious about her presenta-bility—her social level, don't you know."

"There's nothing to be dubious about," said Paladin. "It's pretty low. Carmen is just what she appears to be —a woman. Don't go beyond that. Don't ask any questions, and you'll get along fine."

"I have also asked a number, of questions about this Three-Finger Phil, and I am convinced he is not the original Philip."

"Then that is one thing I shall not have to investigate," said Paladin.

"I beg your pardon."

Paladin observed him. "I thought when I asked you to come with me, that you might be some help. I still think so."

Satterthwaite sat up straight. "Sir!"

"Never mind," said Paladin. "I'm weary, and I may say unkind things before I realize what I'm doing."

"Very well," Reginald said formally. "I accept your apology." Satterthwaite sounded relieved. "Do you wish me to continue my investigations?"

"By all means," said Paladin. "You will find out something yet. But leave Three-Finger alone. He's poison."

8

He went to the Citizen *office and found Mrs. Marsh* busy making out legal notices. He sat on the stool for a moment to watch her. She really was a very pretty woman, with the brown hair curling at the back of her neck. She looked at him and smiled. He smiled back. Finally he said, "Joe must have talked to you about his plans— where he was going, what he intended to do, when he would be back."

She bowed her head for a moment, and finally she looked at him and said quietly: "Yes, he talked to me about them, but he made me promise not to tell."

Paladin said gently, "The circumstances have changed. If you want me to find him, you'd better tell me everything you can."

She put the brush back in the paste-pot. "He said"— she looked directly at him—"he said he was going to join an expedition to free Northern Mexico from the present government and set up a separate nation."

"With whom did he leave?" asked Paladin.

She looked at him fearfully. "Three-Finger Phil," she whispered-

Paladin, annoyed, said, "Mrs. Marsh, you held out this information a lot longer than you should have. You had better tell me everything you know, if

you want me to find Joe."

She smiled. "Mr. Paladin, I was so happy to have a man around, and I didn't want you to leave right away."

He studied her. Was she another Carmen, but more subtle about it? Or was she covering up something else? If it was the latter, he'd better go along with her and try to find out what she was hiding.

"You said you had one letter from Joe. Weren't you alarmed that you did not hear more?"

"Not too much," she said. "Joe was never a good letter writer, and I know the mails in Mexico are bad."

"Eight or ten months is a long time," Paladin noted.

She went on as **if she had not** heard—or as if she did not *want* to hear. "The letter was dated at Guaymas, in Sinaloa, and said little except that he was going into the mountains for a shipment of quoin keys." She looked puzzled. "It doesn't make sense," she said.

"It must have meant rifles," said Paladin. "Do you have the letter?"

She took it out of her bosom and handed it to Paladin. It smelled faintly of lavender. He opened it and read it, folded it, and handed it back to her. "Nothing unusual." He stood up. "Do you have last year's volume?"

She went to a stack of newspaper-size bound books under the counter, and helped him find the right one. Yes(she did smell of lavender. He put the volume on the counter and began to go through it. One month previous to Joe's letter there had been a notice from Tom Whipple that he would sell Black Angus heifers. He closed the volume. No doubt about that. It was a code. Probably Joe had not known the code or what it meant.

He faced Mrs. Marsh and leaned back against the counter. "We must not ignore some unpleasant facts," he said. "It is now ten months since you have heard from Joe. I take it you have written him?"

"Every week."

"If he has received them, he has not been able to answer. If he has not received them, somebody else has done so. In any event, you must be prepared to accept the possible fact that Joe is no longer alive."

Tears filled her eyes.

"I don't want to frighten you," Paladin said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I want you to face the worst and get it over with. Joe may have been killed by *policia* or in a fight by his bloody confreres (for filibusters are a rough lot), or by outlaws who wanted the rifles for themselves, or by rival insurrectionists—or he might have gone fishing and fallen overboard."

She wept softly, and it made him uncomfortable.

He tried another line of questioning. "Since Joe left with Three-Finger Phil, Three-Finger—or somebody masquerading as Three-Finger—must have been in Santa Fe a number of times, as he is here today. Did you ever ask him about Joe?"

"I have **not** seen Three-Finger since Joe left," she said.

"He has not come to the office, even though he is supposed to be in town now?"

"No."

"But before Joe left, he did?"

"Occasionally."

"You saw him?'

"A number of times. He was a big man, rather handsome but primitively so. He treated me respectfully, and he was nice to talk to. I could hardly believe he really was an outlaw."

"He was," said Paladin.

Mrs. Marsh dried her tears. "After Joe left, I heard Thfee-Finger was in Santa Fe a number of times, and I sent word that I wanted to see him, but he never came in —and I could not go looking in the saloons for him."

"Did you try Carmen?"

She looked at him. "I'm afraid," she said primly, "that Carmen is a slut."

"What kind of bait would you use to catch an outlaw— a lady like yourself?"

She blushed.

"How did you send word," he insisted. "Through the newspaper?"

"Through Miguelito. He had known Three-Finger. I think he might have been in Three-Finger's band at one time. But the last time I sent Miguelito to tell Three-Finger that I wanted to see him, Tom Whipple came in and advised me not to try to get in touch with him again, that Three-Finger was a very violent man and there was no telling what he would do."

He was silent for a moment. "Did Three-Finger, when you saw him, always wear gloves?"

"After the Rangers shot off his finger."

Paladin went to the door and looked up and down the street. It was nearly dusk, and the town of Santa Fe and seemingly the whole world were at evening rest. No dogs barked except for a few yips. Mothers called their children sleepily, and even the chickens were quiet, and the last mellow light of the sun softened the bareness of the adobe walls, and created quiet shadows where a man and woman could sit' and hold hands and dream of days gone by or days to come. Paladin saw that nobody was on the street, and went back. "Mrs. Marsh, do you think it possible that Tom Whipple does not want Joe found?"

"Oh, no, that's not true. Mr. Whipple has done his best to help me locate Joe."

"He has also offered to marry you."

She corrected him. "He *asked* me to marry him."

"I'm sorry. The fact remains that he has that in mind."

She said defensively, "It's only that if Joe is not coming back . . ."

"It may be very important to know whether this outlaw is Three-Finger Phil," said Paladin.

"Joe always said the real Three-Finger was a good-hearted man who wanted to help the Mexicans."

"Sometimes, I suppose he was. If the real Three-Finger is down there with Joe, we have a chance."

"Three-Finger is supposed to be dead."

"I doubt it. The hand was sent in for the reward—but it might have been somebody else's. Maybe, if I could rip off that glove, we could find out something."'

"Three-Finger was very sensitive about his hand, Mr. Paladin. He said he would rather be shot than have anybody take off his glove."

"Mr. Paladin! Mr. Paladin!" Satterthwaite ran in the door.

"Present," said Paladin.

"Miss Armendariz has arrived, and looks more gorgeous than ever, Mr. Paladin. Maybe you could introduce me to her. It might be my last chance," he said pleadingly.

"A little later," said Paladin. "Give the ladies time to freshen up." He pulled down his hat. "Do you know where Three-Finger is now?"

"In the La Jinete Saloon. But surely, Mr. Paladin, you are not going to risk your life and limb again by—"

Paladin reached for his gun-belt. "This time I shall have help."

He went to the La Jinete, and found Three-Finger and Manuel together as usual. He walked up to Three-Fmger and said, "I would like to know what relation you are to Three-Finger Phil Williams."

Three-Finger said thickly, "None of your business."

Paladin **caught him** by **the shirt front. "I will make it** my business."

Three-Finger tried to **throw** whisky **in** his eyes, **but** Paladin saw it coming, and caught the man's arm. Three-Finger closed, and Paladin put one foot behind his leg and tripped him, and fell on top of him. He hammered Three-Finger on the chin, but the man was hard. He took the punishment until Paladin got ashamed of himself and stopped. Three-Finger bucked him off and staggered to his feet. Paladin waited, but Three-Finger did not draw. Paladin said, "Who *are* you?"

Three-Finger hit him with a rock-hard fist, and Paladin's already chopped-up face exploded in a corruscating spiral of liquid light. He stepped back, momentarily about to lose consciousness in a world of red pain and fire. Three-Finger hit him again, and his battered face seemed to squirt like a ripe plum stepped on by a horse. He ducked another blow and came up inside, finally caught Three-Finger's arm and tried to get hold of the glove to pull it off, but found it was laced around the wrist with rawhide. But his attempt made Three-Finger furious. He swarmed over Paladin, hitting him from all sides, until Paladin gave ground.

Wayne Lincomb walked in then, looked the situation over with a single glance, went to the bar and ordered whisky without taking his eyes from the two men.

They closed again and went down, this time with Three-Finger on top. They rolled under a heavy homemade table, and Paladin tried to break off a leg but was unable. He did not want to draw a pistol unless he was forced to.

Carmen came in the door, her eyes wide, her red lips smiling.

And as the crash of combat filled the little adobe building, Manuel, the *segundo,* maneuvered for a spot from which he could give Three-Finger some help.

Three-Finger didn't need it right then. He was jabbing at Paladin's eyes—but finally Paladin shook him off, got on his feet, and waded in, swinging roundhouse punches at every step.

Three-Finger backed away. Paladin hit him again and again and saw him start to drop. He started to hit him twice more **for luck,** when **he** heard a step behind him. He whirled, and saw Manuel there with a raised whisky bottle. Paladin was off balance and groggy, and for an instant he seemed to be nailed where he stood. In that instant he could have been killed, but Reginald Satterthwaite, carrying a heavy chair, walked behind Manuel and stumbled and fell into the Mexican.

Manuel shouted oaths, but Satterthwaite apologized profusely. "I say now, old chap, it was an accident, you know."

Paladin looked at him. "You have happy accidents," he said. He did not look again at Manuel or at Three-Finger, who now was on his hands and knees. He walked to the bar, breathing heavily. "Give me a brandy," he said.

Wayne Lincomb moved over. "Didn't do your face any good," he suggested.

Paladin tried to smile. "It was getting stiff. This loosened it up."

Satterthwaite came to the bar.

"You get your chair placed?" Paladin asked.

Satterthwaite grinned. "It was an expedient," he admitted.

Paladin said, "You earned a drink."

Satterthwaite looked at the bartender. "I'd like a
scotch and water."

"No mixed drinks, mister."

Satterthwaite paused. "Then give me the scotch and I'll mix it myself."

"Sorry, mister. We got rye whisky, Taos lightnin', Paso brandy, tequila, beer—no fancy drinks nohow."

"The brandy isn't bad," said Paladin.

"Very well, then, a brandy and so—pardon me, a brandy, if you don't mind."

"Look out!" said Lincomb in a low voice.

Paladin turned. Three-Finger was coming toward him, but he stopped about three feet away. "Look, mister, if you want to know about Joe Marsh, quit ridin' me. Go see Tom Whipple—but go heeled." He seemed to hesitate, and his mouth worked for a moment. A deadly light came in his eyes, "And don't ever," he said in a harsh voice, "try to take off my glove—or I will kill you."

He left the saloon, followed by Manuel.

"He's sure touchy about that glove," said Satterthwaite. "I wonder what he's biding."

Lincomb emptied his glass. "If that suggestion about seeing Tom Whipple means what I think it means," he said, "it might be an invitation to suicide."

Paladin looked at him over the glass. "It might be.... Have you got anything against Three-Finger?" he asked.

"Against the original Three-Finger, the Territory of New Mexico has horse-stealing, robbery, terrorizing a town, kidnaping eight women."

"Isn't that your responsibility?"

"Others are taking care of that. My job is gun-running."

"Who," asked Satterthwaite, "is supposed to have killed Three-Finger?"

"Fellow named Curly Morton, according to the records. He was in Phil's gang, but the reward got too big for him."

"Where is Morton now?" asked Paladin.

Lincomb shrugged. "They always disappear," he said. "Usually the man who turns in an outlaw for the reward is an outlaw himself, and can't afford to hang around carelessly, or he is likely to hang by design."

"So," said Paladin-, "the reward has been paid. Three-Finger's hand is in the museum at San Francisco; Three-Finger is officially dead. But—the hand is no longer there."

"Why would anybody want it?"

"Maybe so nobody could examine it too closely. It is worth something, for a while, to be a man who is officially dead. There would be a certain amount of immunity, because reports would come in that Three-Finger was operating, and the official attitude would be that the reports are false because Three-Finger is dead."

Lincomb smoothed his mustache. "It's a pretty elaborate scheme to provide an alibi."

"It would work only for a time," Paladin agreed, "but that might well be worth while. The stakes are high. Good rifles in Northern Mexico have brought as high as a thousand dollars apiece."

"Then at the moment," observed Satterthwaite, "all we need to do is remove Three-Finger Phil's right glove."

Paladin was facing the door. "Do you have anything on Joe Marsh?"

"Nothing but general suspicion."

Paladin observed a swirl of skirts past the door, and said to Satterthwaite, "Have another."

t"It will be a pleasure," said Satterthwaite.

"Three-Finger invited me to talk to Tom Whipple," said Paladin. "And Whipple's horse is still tied up before the hotel."

He started out, but Carmen met him at the door. "Oh, Sefior Paladin, you look verree, verree bad. You need Carmen to help you."

He gave her a two-bit piece. "Find Three-Finger," he said. "He needs you

more than I do."

Paladin went outside, looked both ways, and saw Miss Armendariz crossing the plaza. He hurried to catch up with her. She heard his steps and turned; her lustrous eyes widened. "Paladin! Where have you been? You're all bloody and cut!"

"Santa Fe," he told her, "is as dangerous a town as San Francisco. I was about to ask you," he went on, "why you would bring a show troupe here, of all places. One performance will exhaust your audience."

She cocked her head to one side. "All the handsome men are in Santa Fe," she said. "What better reason does one need?"

They went into the La Fonda, and he observed the lobby crowded with fashionably dressed men and women, Pueblo Indians sitting around thumping a tomtom occasionally or exhibiting silver-and-turquoise jewelry for sale. "You are putting on a show," he agreed, and asked suddenly, "Who took the hand from the museum?"

She seemed amused. "Perhaps somebody wants to exhibit it. As such it is a valuable property."

He led her to a table in the open patio. "I would like to see you while you are in Santa Fe," he said.

"Tonight is not too late for a buggy ride—or tomorrow," she said.

He hesitated. "I must be cautious. Too many things happen when I am around you—and they are not all pleasant."

She smiled. "Your type is made for fighting—not for love."

"Perhaps." He ordered brandy; she ordered rum. "I have a job: to find Joe Marsh. That comes first."

She smiled. "I can suggest an answer: he has run off with a beautiful Mexican girl."

Paladin thought about it. "I can hardly accept that idea. My picture of Joe does not suggest that he is that type—and my picture of Mrs. Marsh does not suggest any reason why Joe would run off with another woman. He was idealistic and wanted to help others, but 1 think his weakness is that he failed to realize that his first duty lay at home—a duty to his wife, to his friends, to his town, to his country." He was silent for a moment, then went on, "No, Joe doesn't seem to be the type to run off for a woman." He looked at her with a smile, and inclined his head toward the lobby, where three women of the Armendariz troupe had just come out on the floor. "Why leave Santa Fe, which is filled with the most beautiful girls in the world—including yourself, Mrs. Three-Finger Phil."

For a moment her mouth was open. Then she closed it. She did not answer, but he had shaken her. For a moment she struggled with her emotions. Then she leaned over the massive cherry table that must have come down the Trail in a wagon, and said earnestly, "Paladin, do not go to Mexico after Joe Marsh."

He studied her eyes for a moment. Something was going on inside her, and

he said gently, "Maria Rosa, I am paid to find Joe Marsh. I have undertaken a job, and it is my custom to finish such a job." He paid for their drinks. "Besides, there are too many persons interested in Joe Marsh."

"Paladin, I told you not to go to Mexico after Joe Marsh."

He sensed the tautness in her voice, and knew something was coming. Her voice rose. "I said you are not to go to Mexico after Joe Marsh."

He sat back, his eyes narrow. He did not think there was any way to stop her now. She rose to her feet. "I said you are not to go to Mexico after Joe Marsh!"

Her voice penetrated the entire lobby, and the doorway was filled with spectators. He stood up. Her face was white, drawn, no longer pretty. "I said you are not to go to Mexico after Joe Marsh!" she shouted.

He moistened his lips. The lustrous eyes showed insanity, and she screamed at him, so incoherently that he would not have recognized her words if he had not known •them: *"You are not to go to Mexico after Joe Marsh!"*

She was standing imperiously, but suddenly she broke. When the last words left her mouth, she screamed and collapsed across the table, sobbing hysterically. Paladin looked at her for a moment, sadly, then went quietly to the door. "You girls can take care of her," he told the other actresses.

A saucy redhead said, "Oh, she'll be all right. This is her big scene. Don't worry about her. She'll be sober by morning."

Paladin started off, considerably more shaken than he would have admitted. His face throbbed almost unbearably from its multiple bruises and lacerations.

Satterthwaite was waiting for him, and looked over his shoulder at Miss Armendariz. "Mr. Paladin, I thought sure, this time—I followed you." he said, "and saw you come in here, and waited until you got settled^" He looked back. "From what I heard," he said, "I think it might be more appropriate to wait until Miss Armendariz regains control of her emotions."

Paladin said, "That woman is dynamite. Why don't you try the redhead. She's looking for company."

"Mr. Paladin," Satterthwaite said seriously, "I have suddenly lost my desire for feminine companionship."

Paladin offered consolation. "It will return."

9

Paladin gave him a cigar. They sat outside in the balmy evening and smoked for a while in silence. The dogs had quit yapping; the children were no longer calling to one another; the seiioras were no longer grinding corn or slapping tortillas; the stars were brilliant in the clear air of the New Mexico highlands.

"A man would be a misogynist," said Paladin, "to suggest that violence and hate and murder could exist in a country like this."

"I haven't suggested it," Satterthwaite said. "I've merely observed it."

Paladin glanced at him. "Are you ready to take the stage back to San Francisco?"

Satterthwaite sat up straight. "By no means—not till the shooting's over."

"Even if you catch a stray bullet?"

Satterthwaite said, "I paid money to get out here. I want to see the show."

Paladin nodded. He felt that way himself. He looked again at the myriads of stars twinkling silently red, yellow, green, blue, gold and orange in a purple-black sky, and he said. " 'My good stars, that were my former guides, Have empty left their orbs, and shot their fires Into the abysm of hell.'" He was thoughtful. "Perhaps we can change the course of events," he said, "by our own efforts—given time. . . ."

At breakfast, Paladin said, "Let me know if Tom Whipple is in town."

"I will," said Satterthwaite, "send out an alarum."

Paladin went to the *Citizen* office. Mrs. Marsh looked bright and cheerful, but he thought perhaps she had been crying during the night.

He scrubbed the forms with lye, then washed his hands, and dried them on newsprint. "The case is getting low, Mrs. Marsh. I think I'd better throw in some type today."

She looked at him. "Whatever you say, Mr. Paladin."

He got a galley of type out of the forms, poured water over it, found a piece of alum, and got up to the case. In a little while, Mrs. Marsh came back. "It sounds like Joe, up there at the case, that steady clicking."

"If we have luck," he told her, "maybe Joe will be up here pretty soon."

Satterthwaite came in about eleven o'clock. "Mr. Whipple and Miss Velma have just arrived," he said. "Miss Velma is riding sidesaddle, and Mr. Whipple sent word that he wants to see you."

Paladin finished distributing the line of type, and put the rest of the handful back on the galley. "I take it you got an introduction to the lady."

"Almost," said Satterthwaite, "but her horse acted up, and it wasn't completed."

Paladin put on his hat but left his gun-belt on top of the desk. "He's in the Toro Bravo," said Satterthwaite. "He said he would wait for you there."

"Perhaps he has news of Joe," said Mrs. Marsh.

Paladin nodded. "Perhaps."

He saw the T Buggy Whip horse drawn up before the saloon, and went inside. "Mr. Whipple is in the back," said Frank.

Paladin went in. Whipple was seated, biting off the end of a cigar. "Have one?"

"Thanks," said Paladin.

Whipple got his cigar going. Paladin struck an odorous match and lit his own. Whipple looked very calm and sure of himself that morning.

"You have been engaged," he said, "to find Joe Marsh, or obtain definite news of his whereabouts, for which Mrs. Marsh has agreed to pay one thousand dollars."

Again, somehow, Paladin did not like the air of smugness about the man.

"I too would like the uncertainty settled about Joe Marsh," said Whipple, rolling his cigar in his mouth, "and I have called you here to add-a thousand dollars to the money Mrs. Marsh has offered you, with the stipulation that she not be told about it."

Paladin said thoughtfully, "That's generous of you— but what are the terms?"

"There are no terms. When Mrs. Marsh is satisfied to the extent that she pays you the first thousand, I will pay you the .second."

Paladin was not quite able to justify his feeling of antagonism toward the man. "It is worth a thousand to Mrs. Marsh; it should be worth more to you," he said.

Whipple's eyebrows raised. He took the cigar out of his mouth. "All right, I'll come clean with you, Paladin. If Joe is found dead, I'll make it five thousand dollars."

Paladin sat back. It was a lot of money—but Paladin was not deceived. This was why Whipple had wanted to talk to him in the first place. Whether they were all in it together or whether they were serving separate interests, *they did not want Joe Marsh back in Santa Fe.* And there seemed to be only one reason: he would interfere with the gun-running—if that was what they wanted to protect.

Paladin looked at the table and blew smoke in a slow, slender stream at the table top, watched it mushroom and spread over the wood and then arise. He

looked up at Whipple and said in a low voice, "It sounds like an offer to pay for a man's killing."

Whipple shrugged. "It would be a relief, I admit. No more." He smiled slyly, and for the first time Paladin began to pin down his dislike of the man, for slyness was not becoming to Tom Whipple. "I have been a widower for several years," he said, "and I must admit I get little satisfaction from the *chingadas* that are to be had in Santa Fe. A man gets tired of that kind of woman— and Mrs. Marsh excites me—but she can't be touched unless a man marries her."

Mrs. Marsh was attractive and not unfeminine, but for a man like Whipple to talk about it openly of a woman he thought to marry, was something Paladin could not stomach. He said quietly, "Carmen is more your type."

Whipple hardened. He abandoned all pretense of dalliance. His voice was flat-and cold when he spoke again: "You are taking your life in your hands if you bring Joe Marsh back alive."

Paladin put down the cigar and left. Whipple had begun to make him feel slimy, but he got out into the warm sunshine and began to feel cleaner. It had been an offer to pay for Joe's death, in spite of the attempt at an explanation.

And now, of course, there could be only one answer: he not only had to find out about Joe; he had to bring him back, because Whipple would not pay his part unless Joe should be found dead. If Paladin should return with merely the proof that Joe was alive, Mrs. Marsh might not be able to put hands on her reward offer, because of the red tape over the property, but if Joe should return alive, if Paladin could pound some sense into his head about his duties at home, then he would undoubtedly be good for the reward money. And that, of course, was Paladin's primary interest. Or was it? Perhaps he had better put staying alive high on the list.

Determined and somewhat grim, he obtained from Mrs. Marsh a description of Joe, and studied a small tintype which she said was Joe's only picture.

"You are going right away, Mr. Paladin?" asked Mrs. Marsh.

"I have found out there is a stage for Albuquerque at noon," he said. "I am going to be on it."

She smiled ruefully. "I don't know where I'll get another such accurate typesetter. Mr. Jackson did not find a single error."

He smiled briefly. "It helps to be lucky," he said.

He went to the hotel, saw Satterthwaite and told him to pack his carpetbag, and went to his room. Then he discovered he had left his knife at the newspaper office, and went back for it. Mrs. Marsh asked if he wanted some money in advance, and he said no. If he could not get any information about Joe Marsh, there would be no charge.

While they were still talking, Miss Armendariz came into the office—tall, smilingly beautiful—not much like the hysterical woman of the patio. With no attempt to conceal her words from Mrs. Marsh—in fact, rather pointedly

ignoring her—she said, "I heard you're leaving, Paladin. I'm sorry about yesterday. You upset me, and I lost my head."

"All right," he said.

"I am Three-Finger's wife, as you guessed. I suppose it was a mistake—but I love him."

Paladin looked at her. For the moment, she was sincere.

"Tell me one thing," he said. "Were you married to the first Three-Finger Phil?"

"I don't know what you mean." Her eyes widened. "This man is Three-Finger."

"How long have you been married?"

"Six months."

"Where?"

"In New Orleans."

He pushed out the cylinder of one six-shooter and turned it, seeing that there were five cartridges in it. He dropped it in his holster and said casually, "You are a beautiful woman, Miss Armendariz, but I would not want to depend on your loyalty."

"Will you do something for me?"

"It depends."

"I know you are going to Mexico, and I want—I wish you would tell Phil that I will meet him in New Orleans a month from now."

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

Tears appeared in her big eyes. "He went to Mexico last night—without a word of good-by."

"He is a man of sudden decisions."

She brightened. "And so I knew you—"

Paladin said coldly, "Madam, I will deliver your message, but the fee for that service will be $1,000."

"A thousand dollars!" Her eyes blazed. "But you are going anyway."

"And you expected me to do it for nothing."

"It would be no burden to you."

"And I am to walk into a den of thieves and murderers without even a fee."

"Paladin!" she screamed. "You—"

He said, " You are in the presence of a lady."

She glared at him, but looked at Mrs. Marsh in disdain. "You call yourself a lady—you who have a husband who left you to be an outlaw? You who go riding every Sunday with Tom Whipple!"

Mrs. Marsh stared for a moment, uncomprehending. Her face turned fiery red, then slowly drained of all blood until it was paper white. And finally she walked up to Miss Armendariz, who was a head taller, and slapped her resoundingly in the face.

Miss Armendariz was stunned for a moment, then went into action like an unleashed tornado. She flew at Mrs. Marsh, clawing and shouting. Mrs. Marsh

tried to defend herself, but she was no gutter-fighter. She got a pillow from the chair and held it before her to protect her face. Then Miss Armendariz raised her skirts and began to kick her.

At that point, Paladin stepped in and took hold of Miss Armendariz's dress at the back and pulled her steadily away. He turned her toward the door and put her gently outside. He said, "Good day, Miss Armendariz. I hope you have a good audience tonight, but I assure you they will get no better performance."

For a moment she was speechless. She glared at him, and he wondered if she would fly at him. But she did not. Her eyes blazed in fury, and her lips formed curses, but she walked away in what dignity she was able to muster.

Paladin looked at Mrs. Marsh. She was scratched on the neck, but not badly. "You'd better have the doctor wash it with alcohol," he said. "There's a saying in the West that the cats are meat-eaters and their claws are always foul."

Mrs. Marsh was considerably shaken. "I never saw a lady fight," she said. "I have seen a lady slap another over such an insult as that, but fight—I don't understand."

"You never will," said Paladin. "But Miss Armendariz is not really in that category. I think her vanity was piqued. She knew I had accepted a commission from you, and she expected me to accept hers—overlooking the fact that you had agreed to pay."

"But why was it so important? She could write."

"Perhaps Three-Finger put her up to it, to be sure he would see me in Mexico, where he could dispose of me at his convenience."

Mrs. Marsh came close to him. "Is there anything I can do?"

He looked down at her. "Wish me luck," he said. "I'm going into the lion's den."

Satterthwaite was waiting with their carpetbags. Miss Armendariz was nowhere in sight. The redhead was sitting in the patio, pensive, but Paladin noted the stage was waiting near the door. By that time, Satterthwaite had disappeared, but Paladin boarded the stage to wait. There was a traveling man ahead of him—a rather portly man with a heavy gold chain across his vest, and an *anglo* and his wife, and their daughter. Paladin found a seat looking backward, and made himself as comfortable as possible. The driver came **out** and asked if **all** were on board.

Paladin said, "Hold it a minute."

The driver consulted a big gold watch. "Can't hold her long. Have to make connections with the Butterfield for Tucson."

"It won't be long," said Paladin.

He hurried through the lobby; he went into the patio, glanced at the redhead, who brightened when he looked at her, and then he went out. Satterthwaite was not in their room, and Paladin gave up. He went back to the stage, got in, and said: "Drive on."

The driver gathered up his reins, rolled out his whip, and began to talk to

the six horses. They hit the collars; the stage lurched forward, went around the plaza, and turned south. Paladin kept an eye open for Satterthwaite but did not see him. Perhaps the Englishman had been snared by Carmen. Well, it might be good for him.

"We stop to water the horses about five miles out," the driver called above the creaking of harness and the rumbling of iron wheels.

The traveling man put out his cigar. "Where you from?" he asked Paladin.

"San Francisco."

"Well, now, do tell." The drummer leaned forward and said confidentially, "I was there a couple of years ago. Wild town." He winked broadly.

"Where you from?" asked Paladin, to get him away from the line he had opened.

"St. Looie, wholesale headquarters for the West. Saint Looie is a good town too."

"Where are you going?" asked Paladin.

"Tucson. Where you going?"

"I'll go on to Nogales," said Paladin.

"Nogales, hey?" The drummer studied him. "Say, what's your name?"

"I am known as Paladin."

"Paladin! Do tell! Well, now, you come **a** long way from the city out here, didn't you?"

"A piece," said Paladin.

"Paladin!" whispered the woman to her husband, and the little girl's eyes were wide.

The drummer asked no more questions, but continued to study Paladin surreptitiously.

Paladin looked out of the window at the swirling dust, and wondered if Satterthwaite had indeed found his manhood wth Carmen.

"Five minutes for water!" the driver bawled. "Git out and stretch your legs."

The drummer looked at Paladin. "I just remembered I forgot to call on one account in Santa Fe," he said. "Driver, if you'll hand me my bag, I'll wait here and go back on the next stage."

Paladin, starting to get out, stared at him for an instant. Then he heard the other man say, "We'll wait here too. My wife isn't feeling well."

The driver handed down their bags. He looked at Paladin. "You want to change your mind, mister?"

Paladin said, "I want to go to Nogales."

"All right, mister. Git aboard."

Paladin examined his six-shooters again, and was satisfied. He did not know what sort of affray he was about to run into, but he knew there was one—and everybody knew about it but him. Perhaps that was why Satterthwaite had disappeared. He was disappointed in Satterthwaite, for he had begun to like him. . . .

They pulled up to the station at Albuquerque, a village smaller than Santa

Fe, and it was dark. They got out to eat. There was only a dim yellow light in the tiny window of the station. Paladin walked carefully, watchfully. He saw four shadows come around the side of the building, and said, "Down!" and dropped to the ground.

Shots blazed, but the bullets went above them. Paladin ran for the door of the station. The driver, behind him, came in with blood streaming from his leg. "You might as well give up your watch and money," he said. "It'll be easier."

"I got my watch and money this way," said Paladin. "I'll keep it this way."

He flattened himself against the wall beside the door, where he could watch both sides of the adobe. "You have a six-shooter?" he asked the driver.

"Never carry one. Got a rifle on top of the stage, but nothin' on me." The driver was a shriveled-up little man with stained mustaches.

"Come out with your hands up!" said a voice from outside.

Paladin answered, "Come in shooting!"

"We want your money."

"So do I."

Pistols crashed, and the heavy cottonwood door shook with the impact of bullets. He heard voices outside, then silence. Presently he heard somebody say, "Now ram it!" and a few seconds later the door shuddered, and one of the leather hinges tore in two.

They backed off. They would get it the next time. He had his six-shooter in his hand.

He started firing when the door crashed across the table, and the outlaws—two of them—retreated immediately. He heard them talking, and then a couple of shots sounded, and bullets plowed into the adobe wall of the room.

"Throw out your money and we'll let you go," said a voice.

Paladin edged toward the opening. He saw movement in the darkness, and fired. A man tried to say something, but his blood gurgled in his throat.

"Nice shootin'," said the driver.

"They'll either leave or rush us," said Paladin.

"We're coming in after you," said the voice.

Paladin got down on one knee. He looked around and shot out the candle. Shots rattled in from the outside. Then he heard drumming hoofbeats on the road, and a long sustained yelling that sounded like a dozen Co-manches. One of the outlaws shouted something. Another said: "It's a trap!" He heard them mount and gallop away.

The drumming hoofbeats drew closer, the yelling ceased, and Reginald Satterthwaite's cheerful voice called out: "Tally-ho! Anybody home?"

Paladin walked outside. "What are you doing, riding around in the dark like this?"

"Trying to catch the stage," said Satterthwaite.

The driver was lighting a lantern.

"Why all the yelling?"

Satterthwaite said, "That's what they told me to do to scare away the Indians."

Paladin eyed him. " 'God give them wisdom that have it,' " he said.

Satterthwaite answered, " '. . . and those that are fools, let them use their talents.' "

Paladin said skeptically, "I'm still not convinced."

"I hope you are not disappointed," Satterthwaite said, a little hurt.

Paladin slapped him on the back. "By no means. It didn't look very good for me in there. One shot, and they would have located me and filled me full of lead."

The driver said, "You notice only three rode away?"

"Then the one I hit is still here," said Paladin.

"This him?" The driver held the lantern high, and turned over a body with his foot: the stocky body of Manuel with the heavy eyebrows—friend of Three-Finger Phil.

Paladin got up. "Maybe we'd better move on."

"Sure could use some coffee," said the driver.

"You want it flavored with gunpowder?"

"All right. Away we go."

Satterthwaite turned his horse into the station corral, and got aboard with his carpetbag. The driver picked up his whip and talked to the horses, and then again they were moving, the stage lurching from side to side on the thoroughbraces, the wood creaking, the wheels rumbling.

"How can he see in the dark?" asked Satterthwaite.

"He knows the road—and he has a lantern tied above the lead horse's collar."

"Was it a real holdup?" asked Satterthwaite.

Paladin studied him in the dark, wondering how much he knew, how much he did intentionally, and decided it would not help to question him. "One thing is sure," he said, "they don't want me to carry news to Joe Marsh, wherever he is, *or* bring him back alive. They want Joe to stay in Mexico and out of sight."

"What good would that do?"

"It would give Whipple a chance to hurry Mrs. Marsh into marriage and acquire control of the newspaper."

"Joe would return eventually, wouldn't he?"

"If he lives—but not until they have used him as much as they can."

"Used him?"

"I think Joe has a simple spot in his head. They've got him worked up over this revolution, and they keep at him."

"It would all be revealed when he returns."

"What is to be revealed?" asked Paladin. "Who is guilty of a crime. Only Mrs. Marsh, who would have committed bigamy. Meantime, the newspaper's business affairs would be in a mess, and somehow Whipple would be holding

mortgages on the newspaper, and what would Joe Marsh come back to?" He paused, and then gave the answer: "A re-married wife and a foreclosure."

The stage hit a mesquite root, hung up for a second, then lurched hard. Satterthwaite tried to grab the open windowsill but missed, and went over on his face on the floor of the stagecoach. His outflung arms saved him from being hurt. He got back in the seat. "Why in the world," he asked, "do they want to keep Joe Marsh in Mexico? Why don't they quietly do away with him and not run a risk of his coming back?"

Paladin looked into the darkness. "In Mexico," he said, "Joe is worth money to them, because Joe is an idealist, an evangelist. He's fervent—you can tell that from the editorials he used to write—and he's a talker and a persuader. He believes in the cause of revolution, and somebody is smart enough to know that he will keep things stirred up, thereby creating a market for more rifles."

The stage lurched again, and again Satterthwaite tried for the windowsill but missed. Again he went on his face.

He got up slowly and took a deep breath. "I say, a bit of oyster shell would improve the road, don't you think, old man?"

10

It was mid-morning when they rumbled into Guaymas behind five mules pulling a huge old Spanish coach that probably had been confiscated from a wealthy estate during the revolution of 1822.

Guaymas itself was a Mexican village of adobe huts, narrow, crooked, dusty streets hardly more than pathways among the huts; shouting children, barking dogs, squawking chickens, squealing pigs; a white-washed church with a cross on top. On the west was the blue water of the Bay of Baja California; on the east were the imponderable heights and crags of the Sierra Madres.

They got out, stiff and bruised from their long trip. Satterthwaite looked at the town and asked, "Do you really think it was worth all the trouble, old man?"

Paladin smiled. He had grown very fond of Satterthwaite during the long ride. "You came to this country to see the West," he said. "And this whole thing is a feature of the West: whatever there is, there's lots of it. It's *big."*

They had a meal of tortillas and *chile guisado,* which Paladin suspected was goat-meat stew, and he assured Satterthwaite that none but old and rank billygoats were ever slaughtered for eating purposes.

The sun was hot, but in the shade, the breeze from the bay was cool—almost too cool for comfort.

On the trail down from Nogales they had crossed endless miles of desert sparsely grown in prickly pear, huis-ache, barrel cactus, and the spidery ocotillo with its brilliant red streamers. They had come through mountain

areas of pines and cedars; they had gone a day at a time without fresh water; and now that they were there, in Guaymas, it might indeed seem that the shouting had been all for nothing, except that in the silent, forbidding mountains, somewhere in the gashed canyons, deep within the crags that scraped the clouds, were men—small in size and small in strength compared to the majestic power of the mountains, but moved by motivations: love, hate, greed, egotism—men who could feel those things and could respond to them, and could shape other men's destinies to achieve their own ends. For that reason, perhaps, the strength of the men was greater, for men could respond and act. The strength of the mountains was in their immovability.

Also, there were other men—men motivated by a sense of Tightness, an indignation over wrongs, and a pas**sion for justice. Perhaps they** were **misguided in their** efforts **to correct** the wrongs they saw—but who could tell? If they were successful, the world would say they had had **a** vision. If they failed, the world would say it was good enough for them.

They walked down to the old, old wharf that smelled of water-soaked timbers and piles of fish scales, that buzzed with flies and reeked in the hot sun. Paladin went into a small shop and asked for pulque. "It smells terrible," he told Satterthwaite, "but it doesn't taste as bad. They say you can cultivate quite an appetite for it."

Satterthwaite took one swallow and put down the green glass. "Mr. Paladin," he said in his best English .accent, "for the first time, you have misled me. I am morally positive that no human being could learn to drink that stuff with relish."

"Hi, mates," said a booming voice behind them. "Hl'm from London myself. Her Majesty's ship *Sea Bird,* out of Manchester with cotton goods. Came around the Horn, sold the goods, trying to pick up some hides. You're from Hengland, aren't you?")

"Right you are." Satterthwaite introduced himself, and they all sat down together. The first mate was a barrel-chested man from Newcastle named Obadiah Hall; he had known some Satterthwaites in Braintree, and he wanted to talk and to hear his native tongue.

"My crew is Hindoos and French and Eyetalian. Not **a** Britisher in the lot."

"How long have you been here?" asked Paladin.

"Been holed up in this graveyard for two months while the captain tries to get clearance for the California coast. We've still some goods to market."

"What's holding up his papers?"

"The bloody revolution."

Paladin said, "I did not see any sign of it."

"That's the worst of it all," Hall said. "Nobody does nothin'. The federals stay holed up in Hermosillo, where the bloomin' governor lives, and the rebels have two or three camps in the mountains, east of here. So the bloom-in' governor has to send to Mexico City to ask if it's hall right to clear the *Sea*

Bird, and the president at Mexico City finally writes back and wants to know if the *Sed Bird* carries any contraband rifles, and the captain says naturally not; if they did, he wouldn't be telling it. The gov'nor reports this conversation to 'is 'ighness in Mexico City, and back comes another letter sayin' that since the mahster did not deny havin' rifles, it would be necessary to search the ship. But the mahster says the hell with it, he'll have no half-turned-out wild men with bayonets on board his ship. And the gov'nor says very- well, he'll have a detail sent down from Mexico City, and here we sit, day after day, in the flies and the fish guts, waitin' for a general and two regiments of light horse to inspect four thousand bolts of cotton goods." He belched. "Beg your pardon, gents. I'm drunk. I've been drunk for two weeks. Sick of the flies and the fish guts."

He had been to the camp of the *revolutionaries,* and he told them how to get there. "Tyke this road to Her-mosillo north. Ten kilometers out, there's a trail turns off to the right. Somewhere up in there is the camp— an' they're a wild and woolly bunch of *hombres* if I ever saw one."

"We might be able to find a guide," said Paladin.

"Blimey, yes. There's a Mexican named Miguelito just came down from the camp yesterday. He could show you the way, but if the bloody rebels decide they don't like the shape of your ears, they'll cut your guts out."

Paladin asked quietly, "Where do we find Miguelito?"

"Last I saw, 'e was loadin' some medical supplies on mules, down at the warehouse." He waved vaguely.

Satterthwaite said, "I don't understand one thing: the rebel camp is here and the federal camp is at Hermo-sillo, and nobody is patrolling Guaymas, but the rebels come in here and buy supplies and nobody interferes."

Hall fixed his wavering eyes on Satterthwaite. "Hi tell you, guv'nor, you 'ave to know Mexico to understand that. Revolutions come and go in Mexico. The president today may be 'angin' to a Cottonwood tree tomorrow, an' somebody like Miguelito, with a little git-up-an'-git, might be president. So everybody plays both sides of the street. The officials in Guaymas look the other way when the rebels buy medicine down here, because tomorrow the rebels my be runnin' the bloody place." He shook a big forefinger at them. "Only one thing they're touchy **about. They don't like rifles nor hammunition."**

Paladin **threw down a peso. "Drink up," he said "and** good luck."

They **found** eight donkeys, *aparejos* in place, standing in the sun. A warehouse door was open, and Paladin went inside. The warehouse also was adobe, and within, the air was cool and refreshing. He stood for a moment to get the brilliant sun out of his eyes, and **a** voice said: *"Quieren algo, senores?"*

He saw a Mexican, clean shaven, wearing a white shirt, buckskin trousers with flared bottoms, and embroidered boots. "We are looking for Miguelito," he said.

"Miguelito, senores? What does he look like?"

"We have come for Joe Marsh."

"Jose?" A small, slim, dark-skinned Mexican with **a** fine, glossy black mustache seemed to materialize before them in the dimness. He had a six-shooter in his hand, aimed at Paladin's stomach. "Explain that, senor," he said. His manner was courteous, but the six-shooter was cocked.

Paladin did not move his hands. "Kindly let that *pistola* remove itself from my bowels," he said, "and I will tell you. I came from Mrs. Marsh, with **a** message for Joe."

The pistol dropped slowly. "What is the message, senor?"

Paladin smiled. "What would any wife say to her husband, Miguelito? What would Carmen say to you?"

Miguelito bit his lip.

" 'Come home,'" said Paladin in a coaxing voice. " 'Come home before the bed forgets the shape of your body.'"

Miguelito asked breathlessly, "You saw Carmenita?"

"It makes only a few days now."

"What was she doing?"

"Weeping."

"Ah," said Miguelito. *"Pobre* Carmenita! I was **a** terrible brute to leave her so alone in Santa Fe—but what else could I do, senor?" His eyebrows were raised. "The Sefiora Marsh asked me also to carry a message to Joe."

"And perhaps you wanted to join the *filibusteros* likewise?"

"It is true,, senor. Santa Fe is a quiet town, but down here men fight for freedom!"

"Can you take us to the camp?"

"Naturalmente, senor! Joe will be glad to hear from the sefiora. He has had no letter from her for a long time."

"Nor she from him."

"Senor, as soon as I get these lazy mules loaded, we can get something to eat, and then we will set out. It will take us overnight with these mules, who travel no faster than they are a mind to, and you will need blankets and a couple of good Spanish mules—not Missouri mules, senor. These must be Spanish mules for the mountains. They have harder hooves."

"We'll look for some while you are loading."

"You want the quinine?" asked the warehouseman.

"Si, give me one donkey-load."

Paladin started out.

•"If you go to Pedro at the *tienda"* Miguelito called, "do not let that robber overcharge you. He asks three times what a blanket is worth."

"Very well."

After they had bought blankets, they watched a peon repair his cart with a strip of rawhide. He soaked the rawhide in the water of the bay, then wrapped it around the split tongue, and left it in the sun to dry.

"It contracts enormously as it dries," said Paladin, "and irresistibly. Then when it is dry, it is like iron."

They went into a tiny place to eat.

"Fill up on tortillas," Paladin advised Satterthwaite. "They don't taste like anything as much as a wet shoe sole without salt, but they will take you a long way in the mountains."

And long before dark they were deep in the seemingly impenetrable and unclimbable, unconquerable and mysterious, immovable and majestic Sierra Madres. They were cut off from the world, from Guaymas, from civilization, from life except for the soaring buzzards, an occasional black bear, countless rattlesnakes.

They crawled up rushing stream-beds; they went into dead-end canyons with cliffs a thousand feet high, but always Miguelito knew a way out; always he found a goat-path that the donkeys could climb—and where the donkeys went, the little Spanish mules would follow.

That night they had coffee and beans and a stew of badger meat, but there was an exhilaration and a sense of freedom in the wildness and isolation of the mountains that made it taste, said Satterthwaite, "like pheasant under glass at the finest inn in London."

They were up at daylight the next morning. The sun would not be seen for several hours, because of the height of the precipitous cliffs, but they continued to move forward and upward.

"From a little distance," said Satterthwaite, "one might . take oath that no human being could penetrate these mountain fastnesses."

Late in the afternoon of that day, Miguelito began to. call their attention to sign—mule droppings two days old, he said. And still it did not seem credible that out of that vast wilderness of silence, any human voice could dare to raise a sound. But near dusk, when the great golden sun was beginning to balance on the tops of the western peaks, a voice rang out ahead of them: *"Quien vive?"*

For a moment it was a shock, but Miguelito reined in his mule and answered, with his hands on the mule's withers: *"El griio."*

"Que gente? What people?"

"El paisano. The peasant class."

"Bien. Entra."

Miguelito turned back to them and nodded, and Paladin and Satterthwaite followed him to a group of three Mexicans sitting around a tiny fire of dried dung, which made no smoke, no light, no odor. The men were big, swarthy, long-haired, mustached, straw-hatted, and wore belts studded with cartridges. They stared openly and suspiciously at Paladin and Satterthwaite, but did not challenge them. A hundred yards farther, the sentries were cut off from their sight and hearing; it was as though they had never existed, and Paladin reflected: How easy to live in a place like this, and how easy to die—and who would be aware of either?

In another mile, they were challenged a second time, and presently a third time, and the last sergeant, who spoke broken English, questioned Paladin, who said he had important news for Joe Marsh. He wondered what Satterthwaite would give as an excuse, but Satterthwaite, instead, showed them a small, leather-bound book and said, "British passport."

The sergeant looked at him with quick black eyes, and then at Miguelito, and shot words at him in Spanish. Miguelito nodded. The sergeant took the passport from Satter-thwaite and looked at it, first upside down, then right side up. Finally he handed it to Miguelito, who read it slowly, making out the words in English. Finally he nodded and pointed to a scroll: "It says, 'Her Britannic Majesty.' " He nodded as if pleased with himself. "Yes, it's a British passport."

The sergeant put the passport inside his shirt, **but** Satterthwaite spoke up: "Give it to me."

The sergeant looked at him and went into a long speech in Spanish. Miguelito translated. "He says he will have to show it to the general."

But Satterthwaite said firmly, "It is mine. I will show it to the general myself."

The sergeant shook his head and started to say something, but without warning he was looking down the barrel of Satterthwaite's .45. "I said it's mine. Give it back."

For a moment it looked like a fight, but the sergeant stared down the muzzle of the six-shooter until he became obviously uncomfortable. Slowly he drew the passport from inside his shirt and gave it to Satterthwaite, his black eyes revealing nothing.

Satterthwaite put the pistol back in its holster. "I wish to thank you for your courtesy," he said blandly.

They moved on. Paladin stared at him. "Where did you learn to draw like that?" he asked.

"There was a book that told about it—and I practiced at home." Suddenly his eyes widened. "My god, I drew on an outlaw!" he said.

Paladin looked at him. The Englishman's face was white.

As they plodded forward, Satterthwaite said, "I must confess the truth, Paladin. I'm abominably lucky. Everything I do seems to turn out right, with no thought of my own. Except girls—Paladin, I cannot have any success with girls."

"What stopped you with—with the girl in the saloon?" Paladin asked.

Satterthwaite looked embarrassed. "Paladin, it was too easy. I've never formed a liaison with a girl in a saloon."

"Senores!" said Miguelito importantly. "We have arrive at the camp!" He pulled his mule over to let them see.

Even Paladin was not prepared for the extent of the rebel headquarters. It was in a depression in the mountains that, by itself, was infinitesimally small in comparison with the mountains themselves; but it emphasized the size of

the mountains, for within the open area were dozens of campfires, hundreds of men, rifles stacked, equipment scattered, a few tents, horses tied to picket ropes, mules stomping at flies, dogs fighting over bones.

"It's a big camp," Paladin observed. "The problem of feeding must be formidable."

"Each man feeds himself," said Miguelito. "There is game in the mountains —much game. Anyway, they come and they go. They stay a week, looking for a deer or a bear. Then they come back. Maybe they go home to visit their wives. Maybe they go down to Guaymas to look at the senoritas. Maybe they go up to Hermosillo to spy on the *federalistas."*

It was getting dark then, and three men walked toward them. One was a big man, kind-looking, jovial, with very quick blue eyes."

"Joe Marsh?"

Joe looked at him sharply. "Who spoke my name?"

Paladin dismounted and held out his hand. "I'm Paladin from San Francisco. Come to visit you for a few days."

Marsh shook hands. "Afraid it won't be for a few days, gentlemen. The big showdown is coming, and no foreigner has been admitted up here for days. You wouldn't stand a chance to return before the troops meet each other."

Paladin said, "We can pay for our board."

Joe Marsh grinned. "As you see, there's no commissary. You go out and shoot your own. But I advise both of you not to go without a guide. You can get lost in these mountains within a hundred yards."

"I will take your advice," said Paladin.

Miguelito unsaddled their mules and dropped the sadf dies on the ground, turned up so they rested on the horn. He laid their small saddlebags, *alforjas,* on the ground, and took the mules off to find a grazing spot.

Joe Marsh shook hands with them both again. Now that he realized they had come from Santa Fe, he began asking questions: "How is Mrs. Marsh? Did you see Doc? Who's helping with the paper?"

Presently Paladin asked, "Why haven't you written your wife?"

Marsh was contrite. "I do write her once a month— but more than that is hard. There really is a lot to do. I act as sort of quartermaster surgeon general, and so on. You see," he said with small-boy enthusiasm, "they need me here."

Paladin lit a cigar with a twig from the fire, and gave it to Marsh. "Had you thought that your wife needed you also?"

"Yes, of course, but—well, you see, the paper is established and making money, and all she has to do is keep it going, while down here—Paladin, these people are fighting for their lives, for their families, for their rights as human beings—for their freedom!"

He says it impressively, thought Paladin. He is sincere. He is good-hearted, but he is not mature. He already has a responsibility at home, and he has no business running away from it. Besides, who knows whether these men are fighting for freedom or for the hell of it? Joe may think it is freedom, but what

do they think? Or do they think? Is this not primarily .something to do, something exciting, something that gives them an excuse to loot and to rob and to take advantage of women?

Joe Marsh was saying, "I write a letter on the first of every month and give it to Francisco to take down to Guaymas."

"And Francisco is supposed to mail it?"

"Yes."

"Has he ever brought you a letter from Mrs. Marsh?"

"No, he says the mails do not get through."

"Do you trust him?"

"Why not?" asked Joe.

"Who is the boss over you?"

"The *gran general* is Pepito."

"Pepito who?"

"Sanchez, I believe."

Paladin puffed on his cigar. "Don't you know?" he asked sharply.

"Names are not important down here," said Joe. "It's the real man that counts."

You sound like a schoolboy, Paladin thought. This is why everybody said you were visionary and idealistic. Probably you are, but you are also impractical, and this is what I shall have to teach you: that first duties come first. After your wife and your newspaper are taken care of, then if you have time and energy you can run off and join a filibustering outfit. Paladin looked around him in the gathering darkness. For that is what this is; Pepito, or even somebody behind him, has organized for a grim outing, perhaps because it is a market for something— for rifles, of course! And perhaps other things that we don't know about. Whatever it is, the purpose is to make money for somebody's pocket.

This is no army camp, he thought. There is no discipline, no cohesion. These men will go to pieces when the fighting goes against them. They will run back to the mountains and hide until they get enough men together to organize another insurrection, to raise another *grito.* This is not the dedicated crusade of Hidalgo for freedom from oppression; this is license to loot and kill.

But he would have to be cautious in trying to convince Joe Marsh that he was participating in a fool's game.

Technically, he could call his mission completed; he had found Joe Marsh; he was in the process of delivering a message. He could go back to Santa Fe with a letter from Joe, and he would be entitled to collect the reward.

But he faced the fact that his interest went a little further than that; he now felt that he had an obligation to get Joe Marsh back home, and, if possible, to show him that he should stay there. Paladin had to get Joe Marsh out of Mexico, because he was being used in an illegal and immoral activity which would end up with Joe Marsh's death. He had no chance to get out alive by his

own efforts.

A gun-belted boy, hardly fifteen, came up with three chunks of meat. Joe thanked him, and got sticks to hold the meat while they broiled it over the fire. Another young *revolucionario* brought two pieces of cedar to put on the fire.

Miguelito came back from pasturing the mules. "These many animals eat a great deal of grass," he said.

"We won't be here long," Joe said absently. "We'll be fighting the *federalistas* as soon as the general gets here."

The valley was filled with winking fire, and after a while the fires began to die, and men sat around with meat held in both hands, dripping blood, and wolfed it down.

"These are the leathered ones of the mountains," Joe Marsh said briefly. "These are the men who can march on empty stomachs, who sleep on rocks and fight on guts."

Paladin was finishing his own meat. "Do you think they can whip the federals?"

Joe scoffed. "Paladin," he said earnestly, "once we start our march from Guaymas, within a week the federals will evacuate Hermosillo and we will control all of Sonora. Then the states of Baja California and Chihuahua will flock to our banner. In a matter of days, all of Northern Mexico will be free, and a new government will be set up—and there will be posts for all who helped the leathered ones win their places in world affairs."

"There's something you haven't mentioned," said Paladin. "I doubt that any one of these men in this camp— except you—has the slightest conception of what is involved in administering an entire state."

Joe Marsh smiled. "They will learn," he said.

"Maybe they don't want to learn."

Joe didn't listen. "Do you think the present leaders of Mexico knew any more?"

"Yes," said Paladin. "Most of them did. Even the older Spaniards, corrupt or inefficient as they were, had been trained to administer. These men are trained—for what?"

Somebody was playing a guitar some distance away, and several men joined around the player and began to sing a sad *ranchero.* It was an idyllic and bucolic scene, and Joe Marsh smiled paternally as he pointed to the group. But with wild, untamed men of the mountains, there was violence and brutality and unpredictability just under the surface—but Joe Marsh did not see that.

Joe said, "I think you'd better give up your guns."

Paladin looked at Satterthwaite, who looked at him over a rib of bear meat. Paladin looked back at Joe. "We are peaceable citizens," said Paladin. "We have pistols to protect ourselves from outlaws. We have no intention of interfering with your men. Under such circumstances, if anybody wants our

firearms, they will have to take them away from us."

Joe looked startled. Up to that time, thought Paladin, he had considered himself as a sort of benevolent big brother, but when his suggestions were not concurred with, he was puzzled. He solved the difficulty by going around it. "How long can you stay?" he asked.

Paladin said, "We'd like to stay until you are ready to return to Santa Fe."

Joe said instantly, "I'm sorry to put you to all that trouble. I should have gone home long ago."

"You could go now," Paladin suggested.

"Well, really—I can't go now, Paladin. These men are depending on me. They are getting ready to spill their life blood in the cause of freedom, and I can't desert them now."

"Very well," said Paladin. "Mind if we go along with you?" It was the only way he could hope to get Joe back to Santa Fe alive.

"I've had a little training in medicine," Satterthwaite said.

Joe smiled. "Fine. I'll make you a colonel, Mr. Satterthwaite. And you, Paladin, can be a general. I hope you will like our army," he said.

Later that night, Satterthwaite said, as they rolled up in their blankets back under the trees: "I say, Paladin, I don't know about this colonel thing."

"Would you rather be hanged as a general?"

"I would prefer not being hanged at all, don't you know. I have a sensitive neck."

Paladin thought about it. "With titles, we can very well be treated as revolutionaries." He saw Miguelito pass the fire, and Called to him. "Miguelito, when can we go back to Guaymas?"

. Miguelito said, "I'm sorry, sefior, the orders are that no strangers can leave the camp for four weeks. We have had spies, sefior."

"What do you do with spies?" asked Satterthwaite.

"We hang them. Sometimes Pepito wants to torture them, but Senor Joe has discouraged it."

"Well," said Paladin after Miguelito had gone, "what do you think now? Would you rather hang around here and be a colonel, or would you like to find your way back to Guaymas and be a corpse?"

Satterthwaite pulled his blanket in closer against the cold of the mountain wind. "My father always wanted me to have a military career," he said.

Paladin chuckled. "Perhaps, after we get our uniforms and draw our first month's pay, we shall decide we like this army life." He saw that his gun-belt was rolled up and under his head. "That seems more and more to be a sensible conclusion, for I observe that two of these *hombres* are standing guard over us. Their solicitude is touching, and I think we'd best reciprocate by avoiding any thought of resigning until the circumstances are exactly right." He added bleakly, "I take no pleasure in the thought of being hanged."

11

Paladin was awakened by a shout, and jumped to his feet. Four men galloped into the clearing in the moonlight, apparently roaring drunk, for two of them were waving bottles, and all were shouting. Paladin put on his boots and buckled on his gun-belt. He found Joe Marsh and asked what was happening.

"They were on a patrol against the federals," Joe said, "near Hermosillo. They defeated the federals and lost only six men."

"Six out of ten?" asked Paladin.

"It is the fortune of war," Joe explained. "Two were killed, four surrendered."

"They seem to have brought prisoners with them," said Paladin, narrow-eyed.

"Two women," said Joe, and added lamely, "Women are considered spoils of war down here."

The entire camp had awakened, and now, over the area, men were walking or running toward a fire in the center. Somebody had just thrown on an armful of brush, and now, by its light, Paladin could see the two women— girls no more than fifteen or sixteen, black-haired, full-breasted, probably pretty when they had a chance to be, but at the moment undoubtedly well used up and apparently frightened. Their hair was down along their cheeks, and their eyes were big as they looked from one fierce outlaw to another.

The leader of the patrol now appeared to be an important man in the entire camp. He growled an order, and a Mexican came up with a guitar and began to play. Meat was put on the fire, and half a dozen men gathered around the guitar to sing for the leader.

"Who is this bandit?" asked Paladin. "The president of Mexico?"

Joe said, "He's Jesus; he would like to be the general of the whole army, but he is only a small general under Pepito." Joe shrugged. "I'm not sure I trust him."

Paladin looked at the fierce mustaches, the swarthy, pockmarked skin, the glittering eyes. "It must be long after midnight," he said.

"They raided a village after dark, and then cut through the mountains."

Paladin didn't understand it; he knew that a scene of revelry was coming up, and he was curious as to what part Joe would play. He looked at Jesus and then at the girls, who were eating like famished wolves, and back at Joe.

Miguelito came up. "There is a message from the mountains," he said, and handed Joe a small, folded piece of soiled, wrinkled paper. Joe got up from the tree stump where he was sitting, and walked toward the light.

Paladin said to Satterthwaite, "I think we'd better look for a chance to get away. If we can take Joe, all right. If we can't, I will go back to Santa Fe to report to Mrs. Marsh and claim the reward."

"By jove, old man, I have a feeling myself that this thing is about to get out

of hand."

For now hundreds of men gathered around the fire, watching the girls, waiting.

Joe came back. "Jestis says the federals are planning to advance along the road to Guaymas, and will try to force a showdown. We don't have enough rifles yet, for we had trouble raising the money—rifles cost twelve hundred dollars apiece at the Rio Grande—but the note says that rifles are coming. Tomorrow, then, we'll move the camp higher into the mountains, to get' farther away from the *federalistas* and to find fresh grazing, and I will take a party on east to meet the rifles."

"You mean still higher into these—hills?" asked Sat-terthwaite.

"It's a long trail to Chihuahua," Joe said, "over the roughest mountain path in the world. We'll be up around thirteen or fourteen thousand feet before we get back."

Paladin said, "That will leave us as the only two *anglos* in camp."

Joe said thoughtfully, "I was thinking of taking you with me. It might save trouble, for these men are unrestrained at times."

Two men, no longer able to control their exuberance, jumped into the firelight and began to dance with each other, in wild, abandoned stompings and flings.

Jesus, sitting crosslegged, did not look up, but continued to gnaw at a leg-bone.

One of the men seized a girl around the waist and lifted her to her feet. She did not seem to object, but Jesus looked up and growled.

The man ignored him, but continued to whirl the girl around the fire.

Jesus looked up again. His face showed no emotion. He finished the meat and tossed the bone into the fire. Then he drew a six-shooter, took careful aim, and shot the man in the back, just under the heart.

The man grunted and jerked backward. The girl stood, uncertain and fearful, as the man fell backward across the fire and rocked, groaning, from side to side, apparently unable to get up. There was a deathly silence around the fire as the men stared, but no one offered to help him, and Jesus reached for another piece of meat.

"You see"—Joe sounded a little nervous—"I told you they are unrestrained at times."

Paladin stared at him. "Joe, don't you realize that was cold-blooded murder?"

"They are a primitive people, Paladin, and—"

"What would you-have done, Joe? Would you have shot a man in the back—or anywhere else—because he didn't jump when you growled?"

"No," said Joe. "No, I believe in democracy."

Paladin said, "Well, you sure had better get back in a democratic land. You don't belong down here, from what I heard of you. Unless you've turned."

"No." '

Paladin persisted. "Maybe you have become like this."

Joe shook his head. "I put up with it because there is nothing I can do about it. I stay because I believe in freedom."

Paladin pointed toward the fire, where they were dragging the dead man out of the flames by his feet. One man started to take off his boots, but another objected. The first man said something. The second man flashed a knife, and the first man jumped up and leaped on him. After a sudden wild flurry of arms and legs and knives, the second man lay on the ground, his throat cut from one ear to the other. The first man wiped his knife on his pants and went back to the fire. "Who got the boots?" he shouted.

Jesus was still eating. "I got them," he said.

The other one drew a deep breath. He put his knife in his belt. "They wouldn't fit me anyway."

He started to walk away, then remembered the man he had just killed. He ran to him, to see that his boots had already been taken. "Who did it?" he roared.

Nobody answered.

He strode up and down before them a fighting cock. "I will kill the one who did it, if he is man enough to come forth," he said.

Jesus did not look up. "They were too big for you," he said.

Now the killer was in a dilemma. He had been faced down once by his general, and had accepted it, but to save his self-respect he had knifed another man, and now Jesiis had him back in the same spot. Paladin wondered what he would do.

He stood in the firelight and stared at Jesiis, who tossed another bone into the fire, which blazed up brightly from the grease.

The standing Mexican was big, swarthy, as fierce-looking as Jesus. He was pot-bellied, and had a gun-belt full of cartridges. He looked at Jesus, and his face began to work. Paladin knew the agony he was going through. Should he accept the double insult and live, or should he resist it and die?

For he was sure to die. The light of death was in his eyes. He had no hope of outdrawing Jesiis because *he was afraid to.* Nevertheless, he did show courage. He drew his gun and tried to fire at Jesus.

But Jesus was ready for it. He must have had a six-shooter in his hand, perhaps hidden by his jacket—for Paladin had not seen it—and he shot the man in the chest.

The man's pistol exploded, and the bullet went into the dirt. He grunted once, hard, and tried to raise the pistol again. Jesiis shot him again in the same spot, and this time the man collapsed in the dirt.

Jesiis scratched his stomach and belched. "He wanted boots," he said. "He's not dead, is he?"

"No."

"He will be tomorrow. But first he must have his boots. Miguelito!"

Miguelito hurried forward. *"Si,* senor."

"That poor, bony, half-starved cow given you by the mayor of Guaymas. Where is she?"

"You have just been eating her, senor."

Jesiis glowered at him. "What did you do with the hide?"

"It is stretched for drying."

"Is it dry, then?"

"No, senor."

"All right!" he roared. "Get me some rawhide—*dry* rawhide. Cut some strips for boots. Soak it in water!"

Two more rushed to do what he had ordered, and in a few minutes they were binding the injured man's legs with the wet strips of rawhide. The injured man was only half conscious, and groaned continually and asked for water.

Jesiis said, "No water! He wanted boots! He'll have boots!"

He had the man placed with his feet to the fire, and Paladin's eyes narrowed. Finally he turned to Joe Marsh. "Aren't you going to look at his wounds?"

Joe turned pale. "After Jesus has shot a man, one does not try to save him."

"Don't you think you could?"

"I don't think so. He always shoots them that way."

"Always?" asked Paladin, frowning.

Joe squirmed uncomfortably. "He kills at least one man a day. He has a violent temper."

"Violent!" exclaimed Paladin. "He's an absolute maniac. Joe, do you realize that you are fighting a war to put Jesus, and men like him, into power?"

"No, I'm—"

"There would be only one way to prevent it."

"How?"

"To kill Jesus."

"Sh." Joe looked frightened.

"And then somebody just as bad would take his place."

Joe said finally, "Paladin, I know what you're thinking—but remember that some men have to die so that others can have freedom."

"Don't be blind, Joe. Men don't have to die needlessly. This man is a brutal tyrant."

Joe smiled weakly. "Paladin, we may as well face it: we can't get out of here. They would kill me if I tried it. There are always two men along with orders to keep me in sight every minute, to shoot me if I go out of sight."

"Even when you—"

"Even when I empty my bowels—and they will watch you the same way, Paladin. We're *anglos,* and they don't trust us. They know we don't live like that. They keep me alive because I am useful to them. I can read and write; I can keep accounts; I can doctor them to a certain extent—and I have to remember that it is for the cause of freedom. I know that men are killed needlessly, Paladin, but maybe this is the working of nature."

Paladin said, "It's a poor excuse. Even revolution can be orderly."

The girls were dancing again by the fire. Jesus reached out with a big hand and caught one of them by the arm. He gathered up the front of her white blouse and tore it from her.

"I'll give you one guess as to what happens next," said Paladin.

Joe was white-faced. "It happens every night."

The girl, uncertain for a moment, continued dancing at a word from Jesus. Her breasts, full and firm, bounced as she moved, and brought cheers from the men. Jesus reached out and took her skirt and pulled it from her. For a moment she stood naked in the firelight, and then, ordered by Jesus, she continued. Her face was ashen.

Jesus watched for a moment, his swarthy face showing no emotion; it was too far to see his eyes, except that they continued to glitter. Finally he leaped up, seized the girl, threw her on the ground, and they were hidden from Paladin's view.

He did not want to see, anyway. He looked at Satter-thwaite, who had a wild light in his eyes. "Don't do anything," Paladin warned in a low voice. "It won't help."

The girl screamed, and he looked at Joe Marsh. Joe's face was in his hands.

One of the outlaws must have been touched by the screams, for he ran to Jesus and shouted: "Let her up!"

Jesus growled something, and half a dozen men laid hold of the man and held him immovable while the girl screamed again and again. Then a younger outlaw—no more than a boy, with a hat too big for him—was thrust forward beside the captive man and held there likewise.

Miguelito said, "They're father and son."

Satterthwaite sounded perplexed. "The boy did nothing. He's hardly old enough to know what's happening."

"It makes no difference to Jesus," said Miguelito.

It was a long night. The girls screamed many times and Paladin swore that he would stay with the *revolu-cionarios* until he had a chance to kill Jesus and get away.

Toward morning, the two girls could scream no longer, but the injured man by the fire was returning to consciousness. As the rawhide began to tighten up on his feet and legs, he began to groan. The sun came up, and the rawhide dried harder and shrank more, and the man was in agony. They had taken his shirt and his pants, and when he groaned, fresh blood ran over his chest. His groans grew weaker, and after a while he made no more sound. »

Paladin asked, "What happened to the girls?"

Joe shook his head. "One is dead. The other will be sent back home today."

Paladin said, "And you call this a fight for freedom?"

Joe said stubbornly, "Freedom is worth any price a man has to pay."

"Innocent men?" asked Paladin. "Women and children? Do *they* have to pay the price?" He looked around the camp. "These are beasts, Joe. These are

outlaws, not insurrectionists. These men can't use freedom. They wouldn't know what to do with it. They don't even want it. What they really want is power."

Joe said, "Sometimes it is hard to see, but the slow workings of democracy ... the mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine."

"Joe," said Paladin, "do you know what they are saying about you at home?"

Miguelito brought them coffee from the fire. He too looked drawn and tired.

Joe said, "Miguelito told me. They said I joined the outlaws." , S

"And you did."

"No. I'm not an outlaw, Paladin. I joined for a belief in liberty. I knew the real Three-Finger Phil; he was an outlaw and he did things against the law. He murdered; he stole. But he believed in liberty too. He was like me— idealistic, only he went down the wrong path. He forgot to control himself."

"And it turned out to be not so much freedom for all," said Paladin, "as license for himself."

Joe nodded. "But he had the ideal, and I liked him for ' it. So he got acquainted with Pepito in Mexico, and the man over Pepito: Umberto Velarde. Velarde was a real patriot, and he used Pepito because Pepito had a genius for inflaming men to follow him. But soon after I got down here. Velarde was killed by Jesus, and in the shuffle, Pepito took over, with Jesus second in command. But Pepito is only an outlaw himself; he's not as brutal as Jesus, but killing would not bother him."

"You said 'the real Three-Finger.' What happened to him?"

"He picked up Curly Morton because Morton also was minus an index finger, and Morton resembled him. But they were different. Morton had no ideal, like Phil, so Phil killed him and took his hand in for the reward on his own head."

"And pretended to be Morton?"

"Yes."

Paladin said, "Do you think any of us will get out alive?"

Joe said, "Well, if we beat the federals—"

Paladin said, "Hmp!" Joe was a hard man to pin down.

They left in a couple of hours. The rifles were coming by *arrieros*—mule-freighters, and they would have to travel two hundred miles to meet them; the *arrieros* would come no farther because of Indians. Even as it was, they were taking a chance on losing their scalps, for the Chiricahuas had been raiding freely in the middle Mexican states. -

The three of them, accompanied by Miguelito, started east to go higher into the mountains, sometime before noon. The girl's body and the dead men's bodies were taken up into the hills and left for the wolves. The other girl, Paladin thought, would not live long.

Joe said that Paladin and Satterthwaite were not interfered with because

Jesus and his camp were behind them, and Pepito ahead of them. There were very few side trails, and those were watched.

They reached the top of the mountains two days later, in a world of thousand-foot waterfalls and mile-high cliffs. They had left the stunted pines and junipers far below, at timberline, and now there were only gigantic masses of granite, occasional crevasses filled with snow, and the constant, tearing wind. They had not seen another human being, and they camped dry that night in the lee of an overhanging slab of rock that towered above them for thousands of feet.

There were no buzzards up there, and there was no game. One of their mules gave out, and they ate it. They threw away most of the mule's pack, and divided up the rest among the survivors.

Miguelito said the springs in the mountains appeared to be drying up fast. "For a long time there is no rain," he said, "and the springs are smaller." He looked out at the silent infinity of mountains. Once there must have been enormous chaos where they stood, but over millions of years the fire and the lightning and the thunder and the cyclonic winds and the mighty earthquakes and the fire-belching volcanoes had quieted down; and the top few inches of granite had distintegrated into soil; and now there was left a wilderness of mountains standing on end—and Miguelito felt it as much as did the rest of them, Paladin saw. Finally Miguelito looked up and said, "Some of the springs we used on the way up may be dry on the way down."

They saw no Indians, but Miguelito reported Apache sign. He did not think they were raiding, because they had women with them—but around Apaches, one took nothing for granted.

On the fourth day, after a killing pace in thin air that made Paladin puff after a few steps, they found the train, camped in a small opening among the crags. They rode their mules to the fire, and a big Mexican got up to meet them.

"Pepito!" said Joe.

Pepito grunted. "You late," he said.

"Right on time, Pepito."

"These friends of yours?"

"Yes—one *anglo,* one *ingles."*

Pepito turned his black eyes on them, and Paladin held his breath, for this was the same Pepito who had held up the stagecoach on the way to Santa Fe.

"I know thees men," said Pepito. "When you ready to start?"

"Now."

"I pay off the *arrieros* this morning. We start tomorrow."

"All right," said Joe.

Paladin was drawing some uncomfortable conclusions. Pepito would have no use for him; that was plain.

But the presence of Pepito with the rifles in Mexico made it look bad for Whipple, for otherwise, why would Pepito have been near Santa Fe? He must

have come down immediately to Chihuahua with the rifles.

Pepito finally looked at Paladin. "Thees man is *policia,"* he said, and Paladin saw death begin to form in Pepito's eyes.

"He's not *policia,"* said Joe. "He doesn't work for the government."

"Then he works for sheriff?"

"No, he works for people who want to find people. He helps people who think they are going to be killed. Things like that."

"Where he has his star?"

Paladin said, "I have no star. I am not of the *policia."*

Pepito looked at him cynically. "Maybe. Maybe you *policia,* no wear a star."

"No," said Paladin.

"All right. We need you. You come along—but no tricks like Santa Fe," he warned.

Paladin said nothing. So Pepito's vanity was piqued also.

Joe said, "I sent word to Three-Finger that we were ready to start as soon as the rifles reach camp. Did you tell him?"

"I tell him. He's come by boat."

"And you took the letter to my wife?"

"I give the letter to Sefior Whipple," said Pepito.

"But I told you to give it to her personally."

"Is no time, Joe. I'm busy man."

"You didn't bring me an answer, then?" asked Joe.

Pepito said lugubriously, "I'm sorry, Joe. I no have time. U.S. marshal is looking for rifles. This is very fast trip."

Paladin glanced at Satterthwaite, who also watched Pepito, his own face noncommittal. Satterthwaite too knew that Pepito was a potential source of trouble.

Joe looked downcast, and Paladin thought, Yes, he really does love his wife, after all. It isn't that he doesn't want to be home; it's just that he hasn't sense enough to *go* home—or he didn't when he could have.

And now, Joe, we have a real problem: how to get out of here alive—all three of us. I want one crack at that Jesus, and I probably shall have a score to settle with Pepito before it's over, and Three-Finger Phil is coming on the scene—but mainly it is obvious that we could not escape in these mountains. There may be other paths, but we don't know them. Sometime after we get back to open country, we might have a chance. If .not, we'll go along, and surrender to the federals as soon as possible, tell them we were prisoners. Maybe we can at least get a fair trial. With these outlaws, a cross word will bring us a bullet. We can't risk that until the odds are better. And Joe, how are you coming out of it? Are you going to see that you have acted like a child, that you have been used? Are you going back to face up to Tom Whipple, to start being a grownup instead of a little kid running into somebody else's yard? The people in Santa Fe like you, Joe, but it won't do you any good

unless you're there. And your wife likes you, Joe, but there are other men who have their eyes on her—not all of them honorable.

12

Back again at the top of the world, a mule slipped in a patch of snow and fell eight hundred feet into a chasm. They stopped for two days while Pepito and Miguelito climbed down to examine the box of rifles. They tied a rope around it and brought it back up, foot by foot. They opened it when it reached the top, and found that, incredibly enough, the rifles were not damaged. The box had been made of tough gumwood, and had been shaken, but when it hit the bottom it must have been on top of the mule, for the rifles were all right.

Pepito distributed them among the remaining mules, and they went on.

The next day, the spring they had used on the way up was dry, and Paladin, conserving his water in his canteen, did not taste it all morning. Pepito drank his at one sitting, and looked around. "We have to have water," he said, "or you have to divide with me."

Paladin said, "We started with equal amounts. I am not dividing with anybody."

"I am thirsty."

"Then start looking for a spring."

The black eyes drew to tiny pinpoints. "You will not give me a share of your water?"

"Certainly not."

Pepito started to reach for his pistol, but found himself looking into the muzzle of Paladin's .44. Slowly his hand dropped away from his holster. "You still play tricks, eh?"

"No tricks," said Paladin, putting the six-shooter back in its holster.

Pepito looked at them. "You're all against me, hey?"

"Nobody's against you," said Paladin, "but drink your own water, and don't go pulling that gun unless you're ready to use it."

Pepito said, "Senor Paladin, you will cross me sometime too much."

Paladin answered coldly, "You won't pull a gun unless you've got a head start."

They went on down the trail. Joe was scared. Satter-thwaite had a smile in his eyes. Miguelito was trying not to show anything.

Pepito had had his chance and had backed down. He would try again, but not until he had the odds heavily in his favor, for now he had been backed down, and it would undermine his confidence.

They camped dry again that night. Another spring they had used on the way up was no longer running, and Pepito suffered. Paladin drank the last of his water. The rest drank theirs too, until all the canteens were dry, and in the morning they would start even. It was still four days to camp, for the pack

mules were heavily loaded and were slow on the narrow mountain paths.

"The next spring might be dry too," said Joe Marsh. "And we're down below the snow-line."

"The mules will go for another two days," said Miguelito.

"But I am thirsty," said Pepito.

He was beginning to look bad. He had lost forty or fifty pounds, and the skin hung in folds on his face. His stomach was almost flat. His lips were dry and cracked.

Paladin looked at the others. They were not much better. He himself felt a thirst he never had felt before. It reached into his bones, and it seemed to him that a drop of water would be worth a man's life.

In such fashion they followed the trail among the crags, through the giant pines, against the tearing wind that seemed to suck the last drop of moisture from their bodies. They walked so the mules could keep going, for they had a hundred and twenty thousand dollars worth of rifles on their backs, and only the mules could carry them. A hundred and twenty thousand dollars and the conquest of Northern Mexico by barbarians.

For a long time Paladin thought about it. The temptation was great, to stampede the mules over a thousand-foot cliff and put the rifles beyond reach. But would it do any good to try? Eight rifles in one box had fallen eight hundred feet and had not been damaged. If even one half or one fourth of them could be recovered, the potential damage to Mexico would still be there. He gave it up, for he realized another fact: with the mules suffering for feed and water, they would not stampede very easily; he might get rid of one—but what about the others?

* He stumbled along the trail behind his mule. Pepito, ahead of him, walked unsteadily. The sun was burning on their arms and shoulders. The wind never ceased but constantly changed direction to tear at them from a new angle. The path was rocky, and the mules' hoofs began to go to pieces. Miguelito stopped to cut up a pair of leather pants and wrap it on the worst ones, but it lasted less than an hour.

He had an iron-hard roll of rawhide behind his saddle, but it would have to be soaked in water before it could be made into Apache horseshoes. They went along for two hours. The sun got lower. Miguelito was ahead, and he hurried to look at the spring. But there was no shout; he came back, head down. He looked up, his lips black, his face drawn, his eyes sunk into their sockets. 'Wo *hay"* he said. "There is none."

Pepito shouted hoarsely. Joe Marsh looked resigned. Satterthwaite said, "It looks like another dry camp."

The mules were giving out, and they stopped by the dry spring. Paladin dug into it with his knife, but the sand was only a few inches deep; then he hit rock. The water must have followed the rock, but now the level was too low.

There was no longer game in the mountains—undoubtedly because of the lack of water. Paladin killed a huge rattlesnake, and they cooked it in the coals

and ate it with their fingers.

Pepito said, "We got to have water." His voice was a croak.

Paladin said, "Or keep going."

Joe Marsh said, "I don't think we'll make it. It's never been this dry in the mountains before."

Paladin said, "I'll go ahead for help."

"Oh, no, old man," said Satterthwaite. "I'm in better shape than you are."

Paladin laughed hoarsely. "You look like a scarecrow."

Satterthwaite answered, "You bear no resemblance to anything I can think of but the skeleton in Dr. Lawrence's office."

Paladin started to grin, but it opened a crack in his lower lip. Joe Marsh said slowly, painfully: "We are still two full days from camp. A man alone could make it faster, but not in our condition."

"Besides," Satterthwaite pointed out, "the bloody camp has moved."

Joe Marsh looked at him. "I had forgotten that," he said.

Pepito seemed to drag himself together. "No one leaves," he said.

Paladin did not like the way he said it, but he thought the statement was a sound one. They must stay together.

"We could cache the rifles and turn the mules loose, or even ride them," Joe Marsh suggested.

"No," said Pepito. "We don' leave the rifles."

Miguelito said, "I am going to dream of Carmenita."

Paladin went to sleep after a long time, but he dreamed of lemon fizzes and sherry cobblers and tall glasses of iced champagne. He woke up, and it was misting rain. For a few minutes it rained hard, and they lay in it, rolling from side to side, soaking in all they could through their skins. Then they got up and wrung out their blankets by the light of distant lightning flashes, and had a cupful of water each to drink. In the morning they examined the spring again, but it had not filled up. Probably the rain had not been enough to soak through to the water level.

They got up in the morning and staggered on. Pepito stopped frequently to rest. He turned up his canteen to see if there might be another drop in it. There was not.

Now they remembered the rawhide, for the mules' hoofs were getting worse on the sharp rocks of the trail. One was almost too lame to walk, and starting to balk. If they had remembered the rawhide during the rain, they could have used it. But now the rain was gone, and it was too late.

Miguelito, as usual, was ahead, and looking into every possible receptacle in the rocks as he went along.

A packmule lay down on the trail and would not move. One of her hoofs was bleeding.

Pepito said, "Let's shoot her and eat her. We can drink her blood and go on."

Paladin said, "No. A mule's blood gets thick when he needs water, and there

is no moisture in it for a man. It would be useless—and we would have to leave some of the rifles."

Pepito said, "I have great thirst. I must have water or I die."

Satterthwaite said, "Can't we tie that rawhide on without soaking it?"

"It won't work," said Paladin. "It's dry, and hard as iron. You can't shape it."

"Haven't we anything else?"

"I doubt it," said Paladin. "The wood from the rifle boxes, perhaps, but I don't think we could keep it in place."

"We might use our own boots," said Satterthwaite.

"We would be as bad off, for our feet would be so badly cut up within an hour that we could not walk."

'There is nothing to do but die!" moaned Pepito.

"Agua!" shouted Miguelito from far ahead. *"Agua!"*

They started to run. Joe Marsh stumbled, but Paladin helped him up. Pepito was there first, and fell on his knees, scooping up water in his hands. There was perhaps half a bucket of water in a hole in the rock.

Paladin strode forward, seized him by the shoulder, and threw him back. "You fool! That's all the water we have!"

Pepito looked at him amazed. "You are the *gringo* with tricks!" he shouted. "You throw me—Pepito— away from the water!"

"And stay away!" said Paladin.

Pepito's eyes blazed and he started for his six-shooter. But once again he was looking into the muzzle of Paladin's .44, and this time his mouth worked and his jaws clenched, but he kept his hand away from his pistol.

Paladin put his .44 back. "Now, everybody listen. There's enough water there to soak up the rawhide—no more. If we are to continue with the mules, we have got to use it to put shoes on them. If we drink it, we may as well leave the mules and the rifles now."

"Maybe we could have one mouthful apiece," said Joe Marsh.

Paladin shook his head. "There isn't enough. We'll soak the rawhide first, and if there's any left, we'll drink it."

Satterthwaite said in a cracked voice, "Sounds sensible to me."

Pepito said, "You are not run' this expedition, *anglo.* We do what / say—and I say we drink the water." He looked around. "I am the boss. I drink first."

Paladin said coldly, "You've already had your share. If you drink, you drink last."

Pepito said, "Miguelito, what you say? You want drink, eh?"

Miguelito flicked a glance at Paladin and then at Satterthwaite. He looked back at Pepito.

Paladin said, "Miguelito, if one gets sick, we'll have to have a mule to carry him to camp."

Miguelito looked at Paladin for a moment.

Pepito said, "We drink it, hey, Miguelito? You know I am your friend, Miguelito. You know I have always treat you right. I say we drink the water,

Miguelito. What do you say?"

Miguelito swallowed. "I say we drink it too," he said finally.

"All right, we drink!" Pepito started for the water hole, but Paladin barred his way. "Joe hasn't voted yet."

Pepito glared. "Joe vote the way I tell heem. Joe, tell this *anglo*—we drink, hey?"

Joe Marsh looked at Pepito, and a frown grew on his gaunt, whiskered face. His eyes seemed vacuous as he tried to understand what it was all about.

"Joe," said Paladin, "if we use the water to drink, we'll have to abandon the mules. If we use it for the rawhide, we can keep going with the rifles. And Joe, who knows? There might be something good come of it. We started out to get the rifles. I say let's keep on with them."

"We cache the rifles!" Pepito shouted.

"With Apaches in the mountains? We'd never see them again," said Paladin.

Pepito said, "We drink, hey, Joe?"

Joe looked at Pepito and then at Paladin, but he did not seem to see either one of them. He seemed to be making a decision, and Paladin thought he knew what it was: whether to vote with Pepito and stay on the side of the outlaws, or to vote with Paladin and declare himself a free man.

There was considerable on Pepito's side, for it seemed obvious that those who voted against Pepito would find short shrift and sudden death as soon as they all reached camp. On the other hand, this was mountain country, not desert, and Paladin thought, though the thirst was torture, they could still make it to camp, even if they found no more water.

He said gently, "Joe, which side are you on?"

Joe looked at him, then at Pepito.

Pepito shouted, "Joe! We drink!"

But Joe looked slowly back at Paladin and said in his queer, strained voice: "We use it on the rawhide."

"Joe!"

But Paladin stopped him with a look.

Paladin sent Miguelito for the rawhide, and stood over the small bit of water with his six-shooter to see that no one drank a drop. He would not even let Miguelito put his hands in it, but Miguelito folded the rawhide to fit the rock basin, and slowly, carefully pushed it down and held it under with a rock.

Pepito glared, but Paladin held firm. In a little while the basin was empty, and Miguelito and Joe Marsh and Satterthwaite and Paladin cut up the rawhide as fast as possible with their knives, into squares big enough to go around the mules' small hoofs. They cut the scraps into narrow thongs, while Pepito got down to lick the basin dry with his tongue.

They fitted the squares over the hoofs as fast as possible, for they were beginning to dry already.

The mules, gaunt and sunken-eyed, did not resist. The mule with the bleeding hoof lay inert on her side.

Pepito took no part in the shoeing task. Instead, he went ahead on the trail, looking for more water holes— but if he found any, he said nothing.

They saw that the mules' hoofs were in the sun, and the rawhide began to dry into shape.

They would not let the mules graze, for then their need for water would increase. The men ate sparingly of dried mule-meat, and when they were through, there was no more food. At Paladin's direction, they saved a portion for Pepito, though Joe Marsh thought he might have gone on to camp without them.

"I don't, think so," said Paladin. "Essentially he is a coward. When things go badly, he needs company."

Miguelito said, "Senor, I have the great apology. I do not have the courage to vote against him."

Paladin said, "Never mind. It turned out all right anyway."

They lay in the shade, saving their dwindling energy. Finally Paladin inspected the shoes and said, "They're dry enough. Let's go ahead."

They got the mules to their feet—not without a struggle, for the boxes of rifles were heavy, and they had to unload the mules and get them up, then re-pack the rifles on their backs. The mule with the bad hoof put her foot down tentatively and tried it. She walked a few steps and stood quietly. She would limp, but she would move for a while, at least. They went ahead slowly, the wind still strong in their faces, but no longer cold. It brought, in occasional gusts, a suggestion of the desert heat, and Paladin knew it would get worse, for even the brief impact of the hot wind seemed to draw further moisture from their shriveled bodies, that must long ago have given up their last drop of liquid.

They crawled down the twisting, tortuous path, through narrow passes barely wide enough for a mule with a pack, along tiny paths on precipitous mountainsides, above great gorges where they could see buzzards circling far below them.

They came upon Pepito sitting on a stone by the side of the path. His fat was all gone, and his skin hung loosely on his big frame. His voice was pleading: "I have the great thirst. I must have water. Does someone have a drink of water. I *command* you to bring me water!"

Paladin said, "There is no water. Nobody has water. Keep moving forward."

Pepito said, "But there is water down there." He pointed into the gorge. "Plenty of water."

Paladin looked. They all looked. Then Paladin spoke to Pepito. "It is not water. It is imagination. Fall in line, or we shall never reach the camp."

They moved on, Pepito muttering words that were not audible except for *agua.*

"We are going to have trouble with him," said Satter-thwaite.

"We can do nothing," said Miguelito. "He is the general."

Paladin looked at him bleakly. "A general dying of thirst is like a *peon*

dying of thirst," he said. "He has . the same torment, the same need, the same leathery tongue—and a general dies, like anybody else."

"But—" Miguelito did not finish, and they went on.

Pepito blubbered, and even Miguelito began to see that the great outlaw general was but a man—and not a very strong man, at that. For some men were strong at one thing, some at another. Some were strong when things were going their way; others were strong when things were going badly.

Pepito? Well, Pepito was a great general. With men under him to cringe at his words, with a band big enough and ruthless enough to strike terror into the hearts of cornmon people, Pepito was a strong man, a brutal man, a tyrant, a man who could play with his victims like a bobcat with a lizard, a man who could kill without compunction. But, shorn of men to quail at his commands, shorn of the numbers that gave him safety, confronted with a primitive need that he could not fill by a command, he was no longer a general but a man, and his only strength lay in what was within him. For Pepito, that was not very much, and so he wept as he stumbled along the path that would lead them out of the mountains.

Satterthwaite was disdainful; Joe Marsh drew strength from Pepito's weakness; Miguelito watched and listened with a new understanding; Paladin waited for the crack-up. •

It came in an unexpected way. Pepito kept mumbling about water in the gorge, until they all quit listening to him, and did not even look hopefully for the white foam that would mark a stream. Anyway, the gorge was hundreds of feet to the bottom; water would be hard to get, even if they saw it.

The sun reached its zenith, and its heat began to be more noticeable, for now the hot gusts of wind came more frequently to suck at their already dried-out tissues.

They were still, Miguelito said, over a day's travel from the former camp.

Pepito began to drop back, and when he was even with Paladin he said, "Senor, let me have a little of your water." His voice was a whispering croak. "Just a little."

Paladin gave him the canteen, watched him turn it up and try to draw water from it. Then Pepito looked wildly at Paladin and said, "You are hiding it from me! You are trying to kill me with thirst!" He flung the canteen far out into the gorge. "You want Pepito to die!"

Paladin watched' the canteen drop straight down for a thousand feet. Then it hit a rock ledge and bounced, and dropped again, so many hundreds of feet that it gave him nausea to watch it. He looked at Pepito. "You threw my canteen away. I should kill you for that."

Pepito glared at him, and Paladin said, "Move on! Stay in front of me."

Pepito whined. "You don't trust me."

"No," said Paladin, "I don't trust you."

Pepito turned. "You're an *anglo!"* he said. "You don't like me- because I am a Mexican."

"I don't like you because you are a dog. You rob, you murder, you rape, you condemn men to death without a trial. But when you are thirsty, you beg. And I still don't like you."

"You want me to die," said Pepito.

"The world would be better off without you," said Paladin, "but I am not the judge. I will try to get you to the camp alive."

"And I will have you hanged as soon as we reach camp."

Paladin looked at him thoughtfully. "I don't doubt that you will try it. Now shut up and keep moving."

But Pepito continued to nag at him, as weak men have always shown a perversity toward strong men. "You don't want us to get to camp," he said. "You want us to die."

Paladin did not answer.

"You would not go into the gorge after water that would save us," said Pepito. "You are the big, strong man"-—for a moment he was the general again, showing off his strength to a man he was about to humiliate by murder —"but you will not go into the gorge for the water that would save us."

They were on a very narrow ledge that led them around a massive slab of granite that jutted boldly out over space. Ahead on the right was the solid rock of the mountains, that had been there for a hundred million years; ahead on the left was nothing but a blue sky, cloudless, stretching to infinity; a quarter of a mile away, across the gorge, was a similar mass of rock; below— there did not seem to be any below, for they hugged the rock so closely that all they could see ahead and below was sky. The mules picked their way slowly, burdened by the heavy rifles; the men watched for loose stones, aware that a mis-step would plunge them into eternity. Somewhere far below there would be a boulder-strewn slope that would crush a man's body into pulp, or a green tropical hell that would receive him, absorb him, and spew his bones to the buzzards. But that was so far below, that a man who was weak from thirst, gaunt from hunger, tired in his bones, was slow to look for fear the looking would give him nausea and he would fall.

But Pepito shouted hoarsely into the wind: "I told you it was water! Look! Look and see for yourself! Water! We must have water! It's down there! All we have to do is bring it up!"

In spite of himself, Paladin looked—and was astounded. Far below, in a narrow rocky canyon, was the unmistakable course of white foam. He blinked and looked again, and saw that it was still there.

"Joe," he said calmly, "there is water down there."

Joe looked cautiously, and Paladin heard him suck in his breath. "He is right! There is water!"

Pepito said: "Senor Paladin, you are the strongest. I order you to bring water up for all of us."

Paladin looked at him and looked back at the gorge below. It was almost straight down, and he scanned the mountainside below them for a trail, for

any way to get to the stream.

Miguelito said, "The path broadens out, once we get around this point, senor, but I think we have to go a long way before we can find a trail down to the stream."

Pepito said, "Senor, I have order' you to go for water." He drew himself up imperiously. "I am the general, and I want my orders obeyed."

Paladin glanced at him, and then spoke to Miguelito.

"Lead on. We'd better get to a safer place, where we can discuss it. The wind is almost strong enough to tear us from the ledge."

"I have told you to get water!" said Pepito.

Paladin said wearily, "Move on, general. Maybe we will find a way." He nudged his mule,

Pepito's eyes blazed. "I have given an order!"

"It cannot be carried out," said Paladin, humoring him. "The troops are occupied against the enemy."

"But it is an order!" said Pepito, and drew his six-shooter.

Paladin drew at the same time, and fired. His bullet hit Pepito's gun-hand. Pepito's six-shooter exploded, and the bullet knocked slivers from the rock over Paladin's head; then the pistol clattered to the ledge, hit the rock, bounced off, and fell into the gorge.

Pepito stood for an instant, staring at his bloody hand. Then he leaped at Paladin.

Somehow he made it along the knife-edge of the trail, past the mule and her load, with his right foot, it seemed, walking on air.

Paladin crouched. There was hardly room for one man on that ledge, certainly not enough for two—and two men fighting ...

Pepito reached for him with the bloody stump. Paladin rose suddenly, throwing his shoulder into Pepito's chest. Pepito flailed his arms wildly to regain his balance. His bloody hand left a shower of red drops, but it was too late. Gradually he went over backward. For a second he seemed to hang above the abyss, and then he plunged head-first into the gorge.

He dropped a long time before he struck an outcropping of rock, and they would not have known that except that they heard his anguished cry. After that, there was nothing. Paladin tried to look over the edge, but the mountainside below them was concave, and all he could see was the irregular line of white foam far, far below. Perhaps Pepito's desiccated body had landed in the stream; it didn't make much difference now.

He drew back. Without a word, Miguelito led the way forward, and gradually they rounded the hump and could see something ahead besides blue sky. Nobody said a word until they all got safely off the ledge, and the mules were lying in the shade of a gnarled cedar. Then Paladin said, "That's two canteens gone."

13

They found a small spring later that afternoon. It came out of a moss-covered place in the rocks, ran down an incline, and formed a pool at the bottom. It wasn't big, but there was enough for all.

Paladin warned them not to drink immediately—to rinse their mouths and spit the water out. But Joe Marsh swallowed it and looked apologetic. "I couldn't resist it," he said.

Paladin said nothing. He plunged his hands into the water again and again.

They filled the canteens, then brought the mules up to drink. Paladin said, "They won't drink faster than they should." He looked at Joe Marsh, who was holding his stomach. "Mules are sometimes smarter than people," he said with a grin.

Joe was in considerable pain, but he said, "Some day I'll learn to listen."

"We'd better let the mules graze a while," said Paladin. "Miguelito, how far is it to camp?"

Miguelito looked at the sun. "We get there tomorrow before noon," he said.

"Then there's no hurry."

They sat with their feet in the pool and soaked up water that way, at the same time drinking sparingly from the canteens that were left. And finally they all went higher up on the rivulet and drank from the stream itself. Joe's bellyache was gone, but he was shaken. "It sure takes the fight out of a man," he said.

They moved on, with full canteens, but Paladin went back after half an hour to watch the spring, and presently a mountain lion came to drink. He shot it behind its left shoulder, and for a moment its hideous howls turned the little glen into an arena as it spun like a pinwheel, trying to bite the thing that was killing it. Then its heart ■ gave out, and it died quickly.

Paladin went up with his knife. He approached it from behind, and moved it with his foot. It was dead, and he cut its throat, then got to work to skin it. He took the hind quarters and wrapped them in a piece of the hide, and left the rest for scavengers—of which there would be many. Buzzards were wheeling lower and lower; a coyote showed its snout momentarily in the brush; and a magpie watched from a nearby oak tree. He went on his way, and left the carcass for them to fight over.

He caught up with the others, and told them merely that he had killed a deer. Miguelito looked at the hide, but said nothing. Joe Marsh said, "Thank God, we can eat tonight." Satterthwaite looked relieved. "You know," he said, "I had the insane idea that you were going back to cut up Pepito."

Paladin smiled grimly. "It's too far down there."

They finished the hams in one session; they had not been very big anyway. They could have eaten more, but the meat gave them more strength than they had known for a week.

'That's excellent venison," said Satterthwaite, lying on his blanket, "but I

never knew a deer to have white meat before."

Miguelito chuckled, and Paladin said, "I thought it might taste better if I Balled it deer-meat." He smiled. "To be honest, I had no idea whether mountain lion would be palatable or not."

They went on the next day, eager to get it over with. At mid-morning they stopped to breathe the mules, and half an hour later Miguelito called back: "Senores, here is a sad thing."

Paladin went forward. They were perhaps a quarter of a mile from the site of the camp, which was deserted, but at the edge of the clearing hung two bodies by the neck from a big cottonwood tree. A buzzard was standing on the bare head of one, pecking at the eyes, and when it saw them it flapped heavily away, giving the body a push that made it swing like a pendulum.

Miguelito and Paladin stood looking at them. Joe Marsh and Satterthwaite came up behind.

"You know who they are?" asked Joe.

"No," said Paladin.

"Antonio and his-son," said Joe, "who tried to intervene for the girls the night you came. Antonio was uncle to one of the girls," Joe added.

"And this is Jesus's way of handling a legitimate protest," said Paladin. "Even to hanging the boy, who said nothing at all."

Miguelito said, "The army cannot have gone far, senor. These bodies have not been up over an hour. Otherwise the buzzards would have destroyed them beyond recognition."

Paladin said, "Let's get on with it." Then he turned to Joe Marsh. "Joe, do you still think these rifles should be delivered to the insurrectionists?"

Joe said thoughtfully, "They paid for them, Paladin, and I guess they're entitled to them."

Paladin indicated the two bodies. "Even with things like this?"

Joe said, "I hold no brief for Pepito or for Jesus or men like them, but it is a fact that the established government of this state is as bad as this. Soldiers in the name of the governor and the republic rob and burn and kill; they take women from their homes, just as Jesus did; they hang men without trial, just like this. And more, they levy taxes and make oppressive laws; they enforce those they want to enforce, and forget those they do not like."

Miguelito said softly, "Is so, sefior. My mother and my grandmother lived at Hermosillo—that is why I know these mountains-—and they tell tales that will make you vomit." He indicated the swinging bodies. "These are two men, sefior. My mother has seen seventy-eight men hanging at one time, including my father and my grandfather, for the crime of possessing tobacco on which the tax was not paid."

"That's right," said Joe. "It's six one and half a dozen the other."

Paladin pondered. Finally Satterthwaite asked softly, "Are you the judge, Paladin?"

He looked at the Englishman. "No, I guess not." He looked at Miguelito.

"Then if these rifles should be delivered to the federals, you think they might use them the same way?"

Miguelito shrugged. "Who can tell, sefior?"

Satterthwaite said softly: "'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel, half a Line Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.' "

"All right." Paladin drew a deep breath. "Let's get on with it. Lead the way, Miguelito."

They found the new encampment by mid-afternoon. After giving the password—which was hardly necessary in daylight—they were admitted to the mesa where the *revolutionaries* were camped. The scene was the same, except that they were on a high plateau where they could see for many miles —as far as Guaymas, if one looked carefully.

The gaunt, unshaven men were taken to the campfire, where Jesus, corpulent, evil, glittering-eyed, sat with his back against a rock, eating meat from a bone. "You been gone a long time," he said, tossing the bone into the fire.

"We ran out of water on the way back," said Joe Marsh.

Jesus's eyes were sharp as he looked them over. "And Pepito, our beloved general—he did not return?"

"He fell from the trail, general," said Joe Marsh.

"So? Pepito was always solid on his feet."

Paladin spoke up. "Pepito was not solid in the head. He commanded me to do the impossible. He tried to kill me."

"You shot him, then?"

"It wasn't necessary," said Paladin. "He dropped a thousand feet, and he was quite dead when he hit the bottom."

"Oh, so?" Jesus twisted the end of his mustache.

Jesus's eyes were sharp now, darting, probing, wondering just how to attack him.

"You have made me the top general, Senor Paladin, but at the same time you have put *yourself* in line for a promotion."

"I am not after a promotion," said Paladin. "I am not in your army at all."

"A man does not fight so hard unless he wants something," Jesus observed.

"He may want to live."

But Jesus paid no attention. He had decided to force a fight, and he was not concerned with anything Paladin might say. "You are an *anglo,"* he said, "and it is well known that *anglos* do not like *mexicanos.* You must have killed Pepito with trickery, because our great general was a brave man and a magnificent fighter, and certainly he would not—"

Paladin's arms were gripped suddenly from both sides, and his pistols jerked from their holsters.

Jesus grinned. "Now, Senor Paladin, you will have a chance to show your fighting ability." He produced a long, slender knife. "I know you are fast with

the pistol, so I have had it taken. We will use the knife. I am sure you know how to use the knife, senor."

Paladin moved out into the open, away from the clutching hands of Jesus's henchmen behind him. He saw the game: Jesus had no intention of fighting on even terms, and he did not suspect that Paladin carried a knife, so now it was to be Jesus with a knife against Paladin with bare hands.

Paladin smiled. "A knife suits me fine."

Jesus smiled sardonically at his little joke. He moved forward confidently and held the knife low, cutting edge up. "Your guts will make good picking for the coyotes, *anglo."*

In that speech he threw off pretense and show, and now had only one object: to kill. It would be easier if he had a few advantages, and so he, the general, would take them, because he *was* the general and he was entitled to them. Besides, perhaps he was a coward.

Paladin faced him across the 3re. The black eyes had narrowed to pinpoints, and Jesus started circling, very light on his feet for all his bulk, and very quick of movement.

Paladin circled with him, both arms out, so all could see that he had no weapon in them.

Twice they went around the fire that way. Beyond the little area they were using, the outlaws were lined up two score deep, and everywhere were black eyes, seemingly neither hostile nor friendly, but intent. Perhaps they did not care how it came out, for to them it meant merely exchanging one master for another, one tyrant for a worse tyrant . . . sometimes, perhaps, a better tyrant.

Without taking his eyes off Paladin, Jesus stooped and put his free hand on a rifle. He came up with it fast and threw it at Paladin. But Paladin ducked, and the rifle crunched on somebody's cheekbone' behind him.

Paladin chuckled loudly. "The knife is not enough, then, for the great Jesus."

That goaded Jesus into rushing him, and that was what he wanted. He allowed Jesus to come close, but sidestepped the knife, closed with him for a moment, feeling his strength, then stepped back and away. During the flurry he had drawn his own knife, and now he faced Jesus again across the fire, the knife plain in his hand.

"The great general would not fight unfairly, I am sure," said Paladin. "Does the general wish me to throw away the knife so we can fight on even terms?"

Jesus had nothing to say for a moment, and Paladin smiled. This was what he had maneuvered for: to get the knife in his hand before somebody snatched it away from him. Now the general had committed himself, and not even he had the audacity to take the knife or have it taken. Paladin raised his eyebrows. "Then, since you insist, I will use it."

Jesus was quick-witted enough when all around him were varlets or slaves, when none had the courage or the temerity to challenge him, but this was a new situation, and he did not know how to handle it.

Paladin stepped in toward him, to keep him occupied, and Jesus stepped back. Paladin felt the sympathy of the men wavering, for they did not know who would win, and they wanted, above all, to be on the winning side.

He moved again toward Jesus, to keep him off balance, but this time Jesus was waiting for him. He sidestepped as nimbly as a mountain goat, and his long-bladed knife came around in a whistling arc and grazed Paladin's hip.

The men around the fire sucked in their breath. Paladin saw Miguelito with his mouth open, his eyes distended; he saw Joe Marsh, who swallowed hard; he saw Sat-terthwaite, who watched keenly, trying to anticipate the next move. Cool as a cucumber, that Englishman.

Jesus rushed him again, and Paladin moved in against his knife-arm, bringing his own up with all his power. But Jesus had anticipated that also, and pulled his body to the right with astonishing agility, so that Paladin got a taste of nothing but the belt.

Paladin went back at him, going straight for his breastbone, but Jesus recovered his balance and backed away.

They faced each other again across the fire. Jesus was grim and cold, and snarled like a cornered wolf. He knew now that Paladin was not the easy prey he had anticipated-—and possibly he would panic before it was over, for the odds were not ten-to-one in his favor.

He hesitated, and Paladin said, *"Mi general,* you are uncertain!"

His hatred poured out of his eyes, for Paladin was humiliating him. He was beginning to tire, for his fat body was not used to that kind of exertion for any length of time, and the altitude was near the altitude of Santa Fe. His mouth hung open, and he breathed laboriously.

Paladin said, "Tequila is bad for the wind, eh?"

Jesus still did not answer, but his eyes were like sharp daggers.

Paladin rushed at him, saw him take a backward step and partially trip. Paladin threw himself in, with the knife moving up and twisting.

It was the kill, he thought.

But Jesus had not become a general for nothing. He squirmed away, turning from the waist up and sliding the knife between Paladin's ribs.

For an instant there was no feeling, and Paladin did not know he was stabbed until he looked down. Then the blade burned as if it were hot, and he jerked back away from it and left Jesus with a bloody knife.

Jesus was smart enough to push his luck when he was winning. He followed Paladin around the fire, slashing, stabbing, cutting—his teeth bare, his eyes blazing with victory.

Paladin felt the temper of the crowd turn the other way, and he knew it looked bad. The knife, however, had gone in near his diaphragm, and although the wound was bleeding freely, it was nothing that would hamper him. He backed away, careful not to be tripped, and let Jesus continue his slashing tactics until the man was out of breath.

Then without a pause he stepped forward quickly, saw the instantaneous

panic in Jesus's eyes as he saw what was coming, but his shortness of breath and the panic together were too much for him. He tried to back away, but too late. Paladin buried his big knife in the man's stomach and brought it out twisting.

Jesus dropped. He gasped and tried to get to his feet, then fell over into the fire. His arm hit the coffee pot and knocked it into the fire\ and steam and ashes arose from the liquid, but Jesiis did not move. He would not again move of his own volition.

Paladin watched him for a moment. The men were silent, fearful, incredulous. Jesus's clothing caught fire and blazed up, and Paladin said, "Drag him out. He'll stink."

He walked away, and Joe Marsh joined him. "I'm glad you did it," he said.

Suddenly Paladin was so weak he felt trembly. "I hope we have something to eat pretty soon," he said.

14

Miguelito went in the next day to meet Three-Finger Phil, and he said he would ask for mail for the *anglos.* Paladin spent the day taking care of his wound, with Joe's help, cleaning his six-shooter, eating, sharpening his knife, eating, and eating some more. Joe Marsh had talked somebody out of a bear ham, and when it was ready to eat, the three of them started on it, and over a period of a few hours finished it entirely, having consumed about five pounds apiece.

Paladin loosened his belt and lit a cigar that Miguelito had foraged for him. He said, "I feel like a new man."

Satterthwaite asked, "What's our program for the future?"

"We'll wait until Joe has a chance to talk to Three-Finger and satisfy himself; then we'll hie back to Santa Fe with Joe and start collecting the reward money."

Joe said, "You put up some good arguments, Paladin, but I still want to talk to him."

"You'll soon have that chance," said Paladin. "He's coming into camp now."

Miguelito led the party into the camping ground, and men from all over the area began to cheer when they saw who was coming.

"Do they really think that much of him?" asked Paladin.

"I doubt it," said Joe. "But both of their generals are dead, and there are no secondary generals, because neither one of them ever put anybody where he might be a threat to his own position. So now it's an army without officers."

Three-Finger rode a mule up to the big campfire. Paladin watched him, thinking. This is the man who has fought me bitterly at every turn. What will he do now?

Three-Finger dismounted and greeted a number of the men. They had a conference, and then Three-Finger made a brief talk in Spanish:

"Men," he said, "we are about to take justice in our own hands and fight for

the freedom of our citizens and the honor of our native soil. For too many years we have been under the iron heel of the despots; for too many years we have felt the lash of enslavement; for too many years we have felt the pangs of starvation because the *ricos* sit in Hermosillo and Mexico City and levy taxes that we cannot pay, deny us food that is our right, take our wives and daughters for their own.

"At this moment the *federalistas* are gathering in Hermosillo. They are afraid to come into these mountains after us, so we shall go into Hermosillo after them. Free men, fighting men, are not afraid to beard the toothless lion in its den, and we shall advance, patriots all, and take Hermosillo from the cowards who never wanted it anyway.

"Let them go back to Mexico City from where they came, or better yet, let their bones rot on the prairie as they have done yours!

"Let us strike a blow for freedom, for liberty, and for God!

"Tomorrow we march on Hermosillo. I am your leader and I will be in the van. There will be no quarter unless I grant permission. Give the tyrants a taste of their own steel!"

Paladin observed, "He's still wearing the gloves."

"He always has," said Joe Marsh.

The men cheered for a long time, then all got gloriously drunk. In this turmoil, Three-Finger sent for Paladin.

Paladin spoke to Joe as he got up: "How about going back in the morning?"

"I don't know yet," said Joe. "I want to hear what Three-Finger has to say. I've come a long way and stayed a long time for this, and I'm not walking out without a by-your-leave."

"All right. I'll see what the great man has to say to me." He put on his gun-belt and had his knife in its sheath. He pulled down his black hat and went up to the fire with Satterthwaite at his side.

Three-Finger was sitting there, drinking coffee. He stood up, and Paladin thought he looked a little different from the way he had looked at Santa Fe. Where in that town he had seemed intent only on getting the best of Paladin, now Paladin felt immediately that his mind was on something else. He did not offer to shake hands. "You look dif**ferent," he said to Paladin. "I hear you've been through a** bad time."

Paladin nodded.

"I have no wish **to** harp on old **enmities, Paladin. We** have fought, and sometimes you have won, and sometimes I have won. But now we are here together. I suppose you have come to find Joe Marsh, and you have found him; he is alive and well, as you see. You can go back home and collect the reward money. But there is a bigger thing at stake here, Paladin: the freedom of a million men who never have known freedom; men who have been oppressed for hundreds of years, who never have known freedom as you and I have known it."

"I never have heard you talk like this," said Paladin. "You are very

convincing."

Three-Finger said earnestly, "I believe in this, Paladin. I didn't at first, but I do now. I started in it to make money selling rifles, but there is something bigger here. These people need a leader, somebody to beat down their oppressors."

"And in the beating down," said Paladin, "somebody will come out well heeled."

"What do you expect?"

Paladin studied him. The man's sincerity was something he had not counted on.

"When we overthrow the present regime—Governor Tri-vera and his henchmen—we will have need for commanders, men who can keep books, men who can attend the affairs of state." He looked steadily at Paladin. "For this is to be a republic, Paladin—the Republic of Northern Mexico—and as you can see, these unlettered Mexicans are not the stuff of high office or administration."

"You intend to march against Hermosillo, then?"

"Tomorrow. We will pick up a hundred reinforcements that are landing above Guaymas tonight, and a hundred and fifty Americans are coming down from Nogales now; they wiil take Nogales and San Fernando, leave small garrisons there, and join us at Hermosillo. We are bound to win, Paladin. The federal garrison at Hermosillo is two hundred and fifty-eight men, and half of them will desert at the first volley. Captain Tornel has been bought; when he has made an adequate token of defense, he will agree to a surrender on honorable terms."

"It sounds as if you have things well in hand."

"It is all but won. The troops in Hermosillo are the only ones in Sonora; the governors of Chihuahua and of Sina-loa will do nothing until they have orders from Mexico City and that would take months. I tell you, Paladin, we cannot lose."

"It has been said before."

"Always by men who were looking for glory, Paladin. We are fighting for freedom!"

"How about supplies?"

"Will come from Guaymas, to begin with. The merchants of Guaymas are happy to see the old government overthrown."

"Or so they say now."

Three-Finger smiled. "With my army cutting them off from the north, what else can they do?"

"How about the south?"

"The only road is through Mazatlan, and I am sending twenty-five men down there to guard the road. They will not get in from that direction."

Paladin asked, "Who is your man in charge of reinforcements north of Guaymas?"

"Major Femley, late of the Third Ohio Cavalry—and coming down from Nogales is Captain February—both experienced officers, and both backed by men pledged to restore freedom to the Republic of Northern Mexico."

Paladin asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm perfectly sober," said Three-Finger, "and I have not always been an outlaw, as you may realize. I lived in the East once, and had a family and a business. Then I came west." He hesitated. "It doesn't matter why I went the outlaw way. It was a mistake, and I know it, and recently I have looked for a way to live down my past." He looked sincere as he continued. "I have found it here, Paladin. This is a worth-while undertaking. I will be out from under the thumb of Tom Whipple, and I can at last atone for my mistakes and go down in history with a glorious achievement to my name in spite of the few things I have done against the law."

Paladin's eyebrows shot up. He had not anticipated that. "Was Whipple masterminding the rifle-running?"

"He got delivery of the rifles at Pecan Point, and mule-packed them overland to Presidio del Norte, northeast of Chihuahua. They crossed the river somewhere above the town, and went on toward Chihuahua. It was fairly safe, because the Mexican authorities were always looking for them at El Paso."

"And you are quitting the rifle-running?" ■ "Unless I have to have them for my own republic. In that case I will have no choice."

"Your 'own republic,'" said Paladin. "Is there nobody over you?"

"Nobody."

"I can only wish you luck."

"You can do more than that, Paladin." Three-Finger's gaze was intent. "I can use a man like you. You killed both of my generals, and perhaps it was a good thing. They could lead in war, but I am not sure what they would do in peace."

That was the first wrong note, for Paladin felt that Three-Finger should not have had any doubt as to what Jesus or Pepito might do in peace or war.

"And—"

"I have three hundred and fifty men in camp here, Paladin, and I am the only one who can command them. Joe Marsh is a good man, and he can write inflammatory proclamations, and he can talk revolution, because he believes in it—but he is not a commander. He is not hard enough to command."

Paladin said, "He has served you well."

Three-Finger scoffed. "I have used him. He has to be used, Paladin. He's no more practical than a child."

"You need men who can be used."

"I need also men who can command. After we have taken Hermosillo, we shall send out details to take over the other towns of Sonora, and in short order we can roll over all opposition."

"Be sure your head doesn't roll in the streets of Hermosillo," said Paladin.

Three-Finger leaned forward. Somehow, in this role, it did not seem right to

think of him any longer as Three-Finger. "I have a proposition for you. I'll make you my top general—six hundred dollars a month—and when we set up the republic, you can have any job you want. How does that sound?"

Paladin looked at him and frowned. "You want me to be a general for you?" he asked incredulously.

"That's the proposition, Paladin. There will be money, power, position, prestige—"

Paladin was too astonished to answer.

"What more do you want, Paladin? Women?"

Paladin said slowly, "I—I'll have to think about it." He did not have to think about the offer, but he did want to consider its implications. This man was sincere, perhaps even fanatical—and therein lay the danger: he might take badly anything that did not go according to his wishes. So Paladin said again, slowly, "I'll let you know in the morning."

Three-Finger fixed his intent gaze on him. "Think it over, Paladin. If there is anything else you want, out with it. Maybe you can have it!"

Paladin looked back at Satterthwaite. "Maybe you could give Reginald a title too. He's a good man."

"Absolutely!" said Three-Finger. "I will make him a colonel."

"Thank you."

Paladin returned to his own fire, thinking. Yes, a real wish would be to put an end to such brutality as Jesus had exhibited, and which probably exists on the other side as well—but is this the way? Will this be an improvement, or will it perhaps be worse in the long run?

Joe Marsh asked, "What is to be? War or peace?"

Paladin told him, and Joe asked: "If he is sincere, as you say, why not join up? You can't lose."

"Because a great deal is involved besides sincerity. Hundreds of filibusters have been honest and sincere and properly motivated, but that is only the start. A successful revolution is a tremendous and involved undertaking, and not one for amateurs. The man directing it must not only know all aspects—military, economic, diplomatic—but he must have a concentrated drive to keep going once he starts; he must be shrewd and intelligent and highly observant and understanding; he must be able to calculate risks, and to abide by his calculations."

"I understand he has reinforcements coming."

"He said many things—and he believes them—but that is no assurance his promises will materialize or his troops will not run wild, or that his commanders will be dependable. Who knows, for that matter, whether Captain Tornel is not reporting every word to Governor Trivera? Who knows but that they are laying a trap for the *revolutionaries?"*

"That's a risk you always take."

Paladin stopped and faced him. "It's a risk every commander takes, of course, and it might be a risk worth taking, *but:* the truly unknown factor is

Three-Finger himself. Here is a man who has already demonstrated his instability by turning outlaw, and now freshly demonstrating it by taking the sawdust trail and being a hero. Who is to say whether the change of heart is real, or the chance at glory is blinding him? And if it is real, then there are still the other factors I have mentioned: does he have the ability to carry it through? That has been the fault of filibusters for fifty years: they have aimed at what they wished for—not what they had a chance to accomplish. And once having cast the dart, they sat back and waited for the fruits to fall in their laps. In that respect I cannot see that Three-Finger has a chance. He hasn't the steel needed to carry it through. He might conquer, but then what? William Walker conquered in Nicaragua, but his regime went to pieces. I tell you, Joe, this is a scheme laid on quicksand! You can't organize a revolution in a matter of months."

"Sefior!" whispered Miguelito. "I have a letter for you."

Paladin looked at him. "You got it at Guaymas?"

"Si, sefior, but I cannot give it to you before, because somebody is watching."

He pulled the envelope out of his shirt and handed it to Paladin under cover of his brown hand. Paladin put it casually into his shirt. He asked, "Joe, what's to eat?"

"Some sort of meat. Didn't ask what kind. It might be beef."

Paladin sat down facing the big campfire and Three-Finger, who was talking to a group of Mexicans. Paladin took out the letter, opened it with his knife, and read quietly:

> "Nogales, Arizona T., June 6, 1868. Dear Paladin: It is our information that Three-Finger Phil Williams is about to lead a filibuster attack on government troops at HermosUlo, and that two other parties are being organized in Arizona and California to join him there for the purpose of effecting a revolution. In view of the relations between the U.S. and Mexico, which, at this moment are precarious, we would like to keep an eye on Three-Finger with the purpose of getting him back across the border, where we will arrest him immediately. If you should find yourself in position to help us in this regard, it will be considered a great favor by me, since certain recourses are open to a private detective that are not available to a U.S. marshal. It may interest you to know also that I have caused the sum of $1,200 to be put on Three-Finger Phil Williams' head because of his outlaw and gun-running activities. I am sure you will not want to ignore this development.
>
> "If this letter manages to reach you, be assured of my kindest regards.
>
> "Wayne Lincomb."

Paladin folded the letter and put it back in his shirt. "Joe," he said, "you are convinced that men like Jesus and Pepito were not the men you once thought,

aren't you?"

"Yes," said Joe.

"But you think Three-Finger might be?"

Joe said doggedly, "Paladin, I came down here to fight a revolution."

"All right, let's you and I stay with him and see it through."

Joe Marsh jumped up. "You mean that, Paladin?"

Paladin smiled. "You're worth $2,000 to me if I get you back alive. But there are other fish in the sea. Let's see what there is for bait."

Joe went to talk to Three-Finger, and Miguelito followed him. Satterthwaite poured some coffee. "That must have been a very interesting letter," he said casually.

"It was."

"Who is the fish? Three-Finger?"

"You talk too much," said Paladin. He gave Satter-thwaite a cigar, selected one himself. Then he took the letter out of his shirt, rolled it, put one end in the fire until it blazed, then lit both their cigars and dropped the rest of the letter into the coals.

Satterthwaite blew a long column of smoke over the coffee-pot. "Thus the evidence is destroyed," he said.

Paladin said, "I will split with you. Six hundred dollars apiece for a certain piece of work, which I will reveal to you later. In the meantime, we will have to accompany the filibusters—or the *revolucionarios,* if you prefer— and take our chances while we await an opportunity to carry out this assignment. Our risks might be small; they might be considerable. Needless to say, if we find ourselves in a position where we are captured as insurrectionists with guns in our hands, our trip back to San Francisco will be in a jar."

Satterthwaite looked at him. "I came to see the country," he said. "Why should I run home when the game begins to look interesting?" He said with a smile, " 'Life will always remain a gamble, with prizes sometimes for the imprudent, and blanks so often to the wise.' "

Paladin shrugged. "Perhaps we are fools, and should be grateful for it."

15

They moved out the next morning, down a different trail. Paladin and Joe Marsh rode with Three-Finger; Satterthwaite, with the title of colonel, brought up the rear with a detail of six fierce-looking Indians who were to stop desertions. The force of three hundred and twenty-eight had somehow dwindled to two hundred and seventy. Three-Finger's only reaction was to establish a guard; he did not seem to realize that desertions might be significant.

They stopped on the road toward Hermosillo to camp that night. Three wagonloads of food came from Guaymas, but it was hardly enough for one

meal, and Three-Finger sent foragers out to look for game—most of whom did not come back the next morning. But Three-Finger's face was set toward Hermosillo, and he refused to acknowledge any unfavorable development.

He sent Joe Marsh with a detail to locate the hundred men under Major Femley and guide them to the main force. Meantime, two heavily armed men attached themselves to Paladin and Satterthwaite.

Three-Finger was cheerful. Even when the roll that night showed only two hundred and thirty-one, he refused to be pessimistic. "Those who remain will taste the glorious fruits of victory," he said, and unrolled a sheet of paper. "This came by special messenger today, and as you see, even now the *federalistas* are retreating back to Hermosillo. I tell you, Paladin, they have no stomach for a fight."

They continued north. By noon, Joe Marsh caught up with them, after hard riding, and reported that there was no sign anywhere of Major Femley or his ship.

Paladin said, "We had a dozen more desertions during the night. Maybe we'd better stop and think it over."

"It doesn't matter." Three-Finger dismissed the entire subject with a wave of his hand. "They will be in at the kill. You don't understand these natives, Paladin. They don't like to march, but they will come when we need them."

They marched into Santa Fernando late in the afternoon. The *alcalde* met Three-Finger near the plaza, accepted the formal demand for surrender, and agreed to it.

Three-Finger was jubilant. "You see how easily they fall, Paladin? Like ripe plums."

Satterthwaite said later, "Y'know, it occurs to me they can fall the other way as easily."

"It has not occurred to Three-Finger," said Paladin.

"It might be wise for us to join the deserters," Satterthwaite said quietly.

"I have thought of that myself. I was assuming there would be at least some kind of stand-off and we would have a chance to declare ourselves, but this expedition is going to pieces faster than I expected."

"We'd better sleep on it," said Satterthwaite. "There's plenty of time yet. It's several days to Hermosillo."

But that night they found themselves committed, for that night Three-Finger's leathered ones did what Paladin had predicted early in the game but had almost forgotten: they looted the town of San Fernando.

Paladin awoke about midnight to wild cries of jubilation. He got up and pulled on his boots. Fires were burning ■ in the plaza, and Three-Finger's volunteers were carrying armfuls of gold vessels and statuettes, embroidered and lace altar cloths, chests of rare woods, paintings and carvings.

Paladin ran back to get Three-Finger, and found him guarded by four men. "You've got to stop it!" he cried. "They're ravaging the town. You can hear the yelling from here."

Three-Finger sat up. "Paladin, if you had had nothing and had lived on nothing and had been oppressed as long as they have, you would celebrate too."

"This is far more than a celebration," said Paladin. "They are desecrating the places of worship. They are robbing and looting, and before the night is over, it will be murder and rape. You cannot sit there and do nothing, Three-Finger. The church will be your bitter enemy. The people themselves will rise against you for despoiling their church."

Three-Finger smiled indulgently. "I'm sorry, Paladin. The men are entitled to let off steam, and I don't think they will do any real damage."

But they did. They found a mother and her two daughters and took them to the plaza and raped them publicly. When the priest interfered, they shot him, and his body lay in the street. When the *alcalde* appeared to plead for mercy for the women, they hanged him to a rafter in the church.

Satterthwaite was horrified, and suggested they desert immediately. But Paladin pointed out that their presence and their position with the *revolucionarios* was known, and now they had no course but to continue and to hope for a chance to kidnap Three-Finger—or kill him—and let the expedition disband of its own accord.

Joe Marsh too was shaken. "Nothing has turned out the way I expected," he admitted. "I can't understand what's the matter with Three-Finger, to permit things like this." He shook his head. "I should have stayed in Santa Fe. I'm a small-town newspaperman—not a revolutionary. I didn't know it was like this; I thought this was only in newspaper reports."

"I'm glad you've seen the light," Paladin said grimly, "but it may be a little late for all of us."

The revelry lasted until daylight, with sporadic shots sounding during the night. By morning the looters were exhausted and drunk, and nine bodies lay on the streets of San Fernando, while gray-haired men and women came out to claim their dead, and children came seeking their fathers and mothers.

The loot from the church, and some gold coin that had been taken over the dead body of the government tax collector, were taken somewhere into the desert and buried, and that detail returned about mid-morning, as Three-Finger was trying to get his "army" under way for the march on Hermosillo.

Now their ranks swelled again. Three-Finger had stopped taking the roll, but Paladin counted nearly four hundred men in camp that night. They settled down early, for most of them were weary.

Three-Finger called in Paladin and Satterthwaite and read to them a message which stated that twenty-four men had deserted Captain Tornel's command the night before. Paladin had no answer. "Hermosillo is three days away," he noted.

Their own force began to dwindle again. Three-Finger sent a detail to go back as far as Guaymas and search the coast as far up as the Rio de Sonora to look for Major Femley's detachment. "They are American fighting men and

they will not desert," said Three-Finger.

But when they camped on the outskirts of Hermosillo, the detail returned up the river and said there was still no sign of the detachment.

"Very well," said Three-Finger. "We'll attack anyway."

"It would be better to wait for the reinforcements from Nogales."

Three-Finger was indignant. "I don't want them to catch me sitting here. They will think we are cowards. We have enough men to mount an attack against the town."

That evening Three-Finger prepared a demand for surrender and delegated Paladin and Satterthwaite to take it in under a white flag.

The two walked into the little town, down the dusty street, around the plaza, past the church. No human being was in sight. "They have heard about San Fernando." said Paladin. He finally found a priest, who asked him if he was with the *filibusteros.*

"Yes—but we are not looters. We had no part in the rape of San Fernando."

The priest said sadly, "My boy, can you kill a man with your right hand, and then cut off that hand and say, 'It was the hand that did it, I had no part in it'?"

"I know, father, but will you tell me where to find Captain Tornel?"

"In the church, my boy." The brown-robed Franciscan priest opened a door, and they walked in.

A slightly built, neat-looking young man wearing a dapper uniform, looked up from a small table. "You are under a flag of truce," he said.

"Yes. We have a message from the commander of the filibusters."

The young man's eyes were cold. "After the affair in San Fernando, I should have you both executed, but I will respect the truce for the time being."

"We are not filibusters," said Paladin.

"Then why are you with them?"

"We have other reasons. But we are not fighting and we do not loot," Paladin said firmly.

The captain sniffed. "This is a demand for surrender of the garrison," he said. "You may tell your commander that we shall defend it to the last breath: We do not surrender our people to the merciless brutality of savages."

"Very well."

"You may give him another message. If he expects reinforcements from Nogales, he will be disappointed. The United States government has stopped them at the border."

"I will tell him."

"And lastly, if he anticipates that I may surrender as a result of an agreement I made with him, he is a fool. I have no authority to make such an agreement, and would not in any case. Our conversations were duly reported to Governor Trivera, aqd I pretended to agree to his proposition in order to lead him on."

"Perhaps," said Paladin, "I can persuade him to give up the attack."

"You may tell him that I will at this time accept the surrender of him and all his men and guarantee treatment as prisoners of war. Otherwise we shall execute them to the last man as insurrectionists."

"I will deliver that message."

"If you can persuade him," said Tornel, "it might secure better treatment for yourself."

"I do not know," said Paladin, "what I can do to persuade him, but I will try."

They walked back through the silent town, feeling the force of the people's hate against them.

"We could surrender privately to the captain," said Paladin, "but I don't think our fate would be any better."

"I agree," said Satterthwaite.

They found Three-Finger, surrounded by his guards, and reported what the captain had said.

Three-Finger turned. "The scoundrel! The traitor! This is a good example of the way the Mexicans keep their agreements!"

"He said the force under Captain February has been stopped at the border."

"He lies!" said Three-Finger. "He is saying that to discourage us. Probably Captain February's men are even now within sight of the town."

Paladin suggested, "You could send out scouts and ascertain."

Three-Finger looked wildly at the sky. "I cannot spare the soldiers." He stared at Paladin. "General, prepare the army for a full-scale assault in the morning. I want—"

"I must refuse that assignment," said Paladin. "I will have no more part in any attack."

"Insurrection within my own ranks!" cried Three-Finger.

"Call it insurrection if you like. I call it a protest against murder and pillage."

"Then why are you here? Why did you not surrender to Tornel?"

"Because I started with you. I will finish with you."

"You're a traitor! A traitor in my own camp!"

"Not a traitor," Paladin said firmly, and waited for him to draw. One shot, and the entire business would be ended.

But Three-Finger must have known what was in his mind, for he did not draw.

Later, Paladin said to Satterthwaite. "We missed our chance. At the camp in the mountains, we might have captured him. Now he is surrounded by guards, and we can do nothing but wait—and hope."

Satterthwaite said, amused, "We are under virtual arrest anyway—if you hadn't noticed."

Paladin saw two big Mexicans with six-shooters and rifles, sitting twenty feet away.

The two of them, along with Joe Marsh and Miguelito, were held under

guard on the prairie near Three-Finger's campfire while the filibusters marched on the town. They formed a column of four and rode through the streets in close formation. For a few blocks there was no sound. Then, as they drew abreast of the church, heavy firing broke out. The forward end of the column broke out of ranks and began to mill. Firing continued from the church, and men were falling. Horses were hit, and galloped away.

When the column withdrew, they left twenty-two dead and some wounded, and now they gathered in camp again and began to plan a new strategy. "We will attack the houses on this side of the plaza," Three-Finger said, "and occupy them. That will give us a flanking fire at the church, and when we have worn them out in the church, we will take it by storm. I do not think it will be too difficult. A spy has informed me that Captain Tornel has only forty-one men left under his command."

Paladin and his party were under arrest. They had freedom of movement, but the guards were always at their heels, and it was obvious that they should not try to take advantage of their freedom unless they were ready for a showdown.

Three-Finger was running the attack single-handed. He directed the column in a hard gallop down the street toward the church, and when they reached a position where they filled the block, they jumped off their horses and ran to the houses. Some of those were empty, but others had not been evacuated, and the occupants were slaughtered in cold blood. One old man ran out in the street with a slingshot, and a huge belted Mexican hit him in the back with a bayonet with all his force. The bayonet went through him and protruded from his chest, and the old man pitched forward. The bayonet stuck in his body and twisted the rifle out of the killer's hands.

Within a moment, the filibusters were entrenched in the huts—the usual adobe with brush roofs. They began to fire at the church, but by mid-afternoon it was evident they were not accomplishing very much, for the soldiers were well fortified. By that time, however,.fourteen more filibusters were killed, and nine wounded, and Joe Marsh had his hands full trying to dress their wounds with almost no medical supplies but quinine, as it turned out.

Three-Finger said that evening, "We'll get them yet. We can hold out as long as they do."

Food, however, was already scarce, and foragers reported increasing difficulty. A roll call that night showed a hundred and eighteen men in camp.

"The reinforcements will be here tomorrow," Three-Finger predicted.

But during the night he sent for Paladin, and asked him if he thought it would be advisable to surrender.

"You can't win," said Paladin. "You haven't a chance. You'll never get them out of that church."

"Nor can they get us out of the huts unless they come out and fight," said Three-Finger.

At dawn, Paladin and Satterthwaite went back, again under a flag of truce,

and talked to Tornel. "He is ready to surrender on the terms you offered," said Paladin.

Tornel laughed shortly. "Those terms were offered yesterday. Today the terms are surrender at discretion."

Paladin thought it over. He was not astonished, for Three-Finger had nothing to trade on. But surrender at discretion meant no guarantee of anything—not even life. There was not the slightest doubt that every man who surrendered would be taken out and shot.

Paladin and Satterthwaite might well be among them, and there seemed no hope that they could surrender even as prisoners of war.

"I will deliver your message."

"Please do," said Tornel.

Three-Finger turned white when he heard the message. 'That means they will murder us!" he said.

"It seems to me," said Paladin, "that there is only one sensible thing to do: retreat. If you retreat in order, you can withdraw to the mountains. If your men desert and scatter, they will catch some, but most of them will get away. This would seem to be the sensible thing."

It would also, thought Paladin, give him an excellent chance to catch Three-Finger away from his bodyguard— but he did not say that.

"No!" said Three-Finger. "We have raised the *grito,* and we shall die like men even if the enemy has betrayed us, even if our comrades have deserted u %!"

The fanatic light was in his eyes, and he sent reinforcements to the men holding the huts. Three more were dead, for either civilians or soldiers had taken up positions across the square and were directing a steady fire at the huts. And a new crisis arose: Three-Finger's men were getting low on gunpowder.

He had depended on taking the town without using much ammunition, and this new development came as an unpleasant shock. But he directed his men to keep the huts occupied, keep their heads down, keep the soldiers pinned in the church.

He called Paladin again. "I am going to play my ace," he said. "I want you to confer with the captain again, and tell him that if he will accept our surrender as prisoners of war, I will show him where half a million dollars in loot from San Fernando is buried."

They took the long walk back down the dusty street, past houses that exuded hatred and fear, past tiny windows that showed black rifle muzzles, now temporarily stilled for the white flag of truce. They found Captain Tornel in the church, and Paladin related the offer, but Tornel laughed grimly.

"A thousand times that much loot would not pay for the lives and the property, the suffering and indignities of the people of San Fernando." His voice raised. "Those two girls who were violated in the *plaza?* Do you think they would undergo that night of torture for half a million pesos? Do you

think their father would sell his life for half a million pesos? No!" His eyes flashed. "Tell the rebel pig to come on and fight! I shall yet pickle his head in vinegar!"

Paladin reported to Three-Finger that Tornel had declined, and Three-Finger seemed to go crazy with frustration. "I will grind him into the dirt of the streets of Hermosillo! I will slit his ears and hang him upside down by his testicles!"

As they went away, he was still shouting threats. Satter-thwaite said: "There would be a respite if he would order a retreat."

Paladin shook his head sadly. "His judgment—if he ever had any—is gone. He is now a fanatic, going to destruction as if hypnotized."

An hour later there was a sudden flurry of shouts and some gunshots from the hut next to the church, and a runner came back to Three-Finger, his black eyes wide. *"Mi general,* the soldiers have cut through the side of the hut and have gone inside and killed all within but me!"

Three-Finger growled. "How many were in there?"

"Six men, senor."

"You stay back here," said Three-Finger. "We have a surprise for them."

They had a barrel and a half of gunpowder left. Three-Finger took the full barrel and arranged a fuse into it. Then he called twenty men and laid out his plan. They would enter the hut closest to the church, and when he gave the signal, they would run to the church, open the doors, take the barrel of powder inside, and light the fuse. At the last moment they would run. The powder would explode, the church would come down in ruins, crushing all the soldiers in it, and they would have the day.

Paladin, still looking for a chance to capture Three-Finger or kill him in a fair fight, watched the new strategy from a point of vantage behind an old stone well. Paladin's guard had been withdrawn for the final assault on the town, for Three-Finger's bodyguard still watched over him.

They got the powder keg to the first hut, but as they opened the door to make the run to the hut closest to the church, sudden yells and gunshots came from that one, and then silence. A form appeared for an instant in the doorway, and Paladin knew what had happened: the soldiers had cut through the wall of the first hut, into the wall of the second, and had again massacred the filibusters inside. That could not keep up forever.

He saw Three-Finger conferring with his special squad. Then, under cover of fire from the four huts which still contained filibusters, the twenty men ran up the street, one of them carrying the barrel of powder. They ran the gauntlet past the two soldier-occupied huts, and three men went down. The other seventeen kept on. At the steps of the church, two more dropped, and the man carrying the powder ran up the steps and turned, to find himself alone, for the others were grouped at the bottom, firing back. The man with the powder ran back down, and the fifteen men again ran the gauntlet, losing one more man. Out of twenty, they still had fourteen, but five of those were injured—three

seriously. One was spitting blood; one had a deep wound through the buttock; the third had a head wound that drenched his neck with blood.

Three-Finger called another conference. He was desperate, and acted like a man cornered rather than a man attacking. But he would listen to no talk of retreat. "We have come to fight like men," he said. "We shall stay to die like men."

And apparently the *filibusteros* had so far lost sight of their original objective that they had no better conception of common sense than did Three-Finger.

They went back to the huts with the barrel of powder, planning this time to wait until dark. But shortly after they were inside, a flaming arrow launched from the other side of the plaza lodged in the brush roof, and the roof began to burn.

Three-Finger called a hasty conference. In a moment twelve men dashed from the hut toward the church, Three-Finger carrying the barrel of gunpowder.

Two more dropped in the street. The ten remaining reached the steps. A flurry of shots downed three of them, and the others turned and ran, leaving Three-Finger alone. He took a last look at his degenerated command, his grandiose plan, his crumbling Republic of Northern Mexico. And finally, defeated, he set down the barrel of gunpowder and slowly raised his hands, untouched in the hail of vengeful bullets.

The firing stopped. Two soldiers ran out and took charge of him. Men came slowly out of the huts, their hands in the air. Forty-eight of them. The soldiers gathered them in, and Captain Tornel, with a special detail, came toward Paladin and his group.

Paladin said, "It doesn't look very good." And then suddenly, out of nowhere, Three-Finger came running down the other street, unpursued. Tornel and his men took cover, but Paladin ran out to meet him, and waited. Three-Finger saw him and shouted: "Go ahead! Shoot me down like a dog! Go ahead!"

Paladin stepped in close and hit him in the face. Three-Finger looked astounded. Paladin hit him again. Three-Finger struck back, but feebly. Paladin spun him halfway around, and as Three-Finger's back was toward him, Paladin struck him with all his power on the back of the neck, with the edge of both hands. Three-Finger flattened on his face in the dust.

Tornel came forward. "Senor, you have make a nice attempt at clemency."

But it was not until later, when Paladin faced Tornel in his office in the church, that he got the whole story.

"We know you are with thees *filibustero,"* said Tornel, "because Senor Lincomb has tell us to watch out for you. But we do not know what to do with you. You are with insurrectionists; maybe you die with insurrectionists."

Paladin kept silent.

Outside, in the plaza, he heard marching commands. Then a shout:

"Preparasel"

The captain glanced at the window.

"Apuntase!"

Tornel looked at his watch and made an entry on his day-book.

"Fuego!"

The crash of a dozen rifles drowned out all other sound, and a moment later the acrid smell of powder smoke drifted into the window.

"Five gone," said Tornel quietly. "Now, you four gentlemen, I have teen advised, should be turned over to Senor Lincomb at Nogales, and I am happy to tell you that by your act of preventing the escape of Senor Three-Finger at the last minute, you have earned a reward for his capture."

Another set of marching commands; another set of firing commands; another crash of rifles.

"There is one other thing: I suppose you all have passports."

Paladin caught his breath, but Satterthwaite stepped up. "I have a passport from Her Imperial Majesty Victoria," he said, laying it on the captain's desk.

Tornel looked it over. "Very good, very good." He looked at the others. "This is such a good passport, perhaps it will be enough for all of you."

Another set of marching orders, of execution commands, and the crash of rifles.

"There are forty-five of them," said Tornel. "It will take a little while."

Miguelito was the first to examine Three-Finger's body. He slit the thongs on Three-Finger's wrist and ripped off the glove. The hand was an unhealthy white, for obviously it had never been exposed to the sun. The index finger was missing, but the three other fingers were tiny, dwarfish, like wrinkled, shrunken white worms. Miguelito stared, and dropped the glove as if it had been contaminated.

"So that was his secret," Paladin said finally. "Did you know about it?"

Joe Marsh drew a deep breath. "No." He looked away. "Some people thought he started wearing gloves after his finger was shot off, but the truth is that he had worn them as long as I had known him, and I had never seen his right hand bare."

Paladin looked down at his riddled body. "He was a true filibuster," he said. "An amateur at the game of war."

They rode the stage into Santa Fe one afternoon. Joe Marsh went to the *Citizen* office; Paladin and Satterthwaite went with Miguelito to the Toro Bravo for a drink, and finally Paladin asked Miguelito what he had under cover, that he had carried so carefully.

"I bought his head," said Miguelito. "I'm going to sell it to the museum in San Francisco. How much you think I get?"

Paladin stared at him. "You brought that head all the way home with you, Miguelito?"

Miguelito nodded. *"Si."* He asked eagerly, "How much you think I get?"

Paladin looked away. "I don't know the going price for heads right now—

but I hope you are successful. Otherwise you will need some advice on how to get rid of a—"

"Migueli-i-ito!"

Miguelito's eyes widened, and he leaped to his feet. *"Carmeni-i-ita!"* he cried, and they ran into each other's arms.

Satterthwaite watched them for a moment, and sighed. Paladin got up and went to the bar.

Carmen turned her head, her lustrous eyes wide as she watched him, but her lips still tight on Miguelito's.

"Have you seen Whipple in town lately?" Paladin asked the bartender.

"Sure, he's been living at the hotel." The bartender snickered. "Between Mrs. Marsh and that Armendariz woman, it looks like—"

Carmen drew her mouth away from Miguelito's. "He's at the hotel now with the theater woman," she said.

Paladin looked at her, and noted the fire in her black eyes, and it occurred to him that perhaps Carmen had a motivation of her own. But Paladin was not concerned over that—nor did there seem to be any need for concern, because Carmen had Miguelito, and Miguelito had his arms full of Carmen.

"You need to see Whipple?" asked Satterthwaite.

Paladin said thoughtfully, "He owes me a thousand dollars—but that is not the most important reason for wanting to know where he is." He looked absently at Carmen. "I am more concerned over Joe Marsh. He's not much of a fighter, but he is an idealist, and when he finds that Whipple has been courting his wife—"

"How will he know?"

"If I have her figured right, she will tell him." He added, "She would be foolish to try to hide it." After a moment's pause, he said: "Remember, too, that Whipple is counting on Joe Marsh's not coming back alive."

Satterthwaite said, "We'd better keep an eye on Joe until things settle down."

Paladin nodded. "That's about the size of it. Let's take a *pasear* over to the newspaper office, just to be sure that Joe doesn't do anything rash."

Satterthwaite agreed. "After all he's been through, I'd hate to see something happen to him now."

They went outside into the high, bright sun of New Mexico. They crossed the plaza, and the Mexican woman was there with her many small children.

"Things been happening while we were gone," said Satterthwaite.

Paladin nodded. The woman was nursing a tiny, brown-faced baby. "It was to be expected," he said.

They turned up the street past the hotel, toward the church. They went into the *Citizen* office and stood for a moment while their eyes got adjusted. Then Paladin heard the scrape of a ramrod against a gun-barrel, and stared at Mrs. Marsh, trying to push home a bullet in a muzzle-loading rifle. "Trouble, Mrs. Marsh?" he asked.

She brushed her hair away from her eyes, which were filled with tears. "Mr. Paladin, can you help me?" she asked hopefully.

He took the rifle away from her, gently. "Is it Joe?"

"He says that Mr. Whipple was behind the gun-running, and that he is going to settle with him. But when he found out that Mr. Whipple had tried to get me to marry him, he lost his temper and said he would kill Mr. Whipple — and he called him a terrible name!" She began to sob.

Paladin took out his six-shooter. He opened the loading-gate and turned the cylinder to be sure there were five cartridges in it. "We'll go see if he needs help," he told her. She smiled through her tears.

"Which way did Joe start out?"

"He was going to the hotel."

Paladin said quietly, "We'll mosey on—and don't try to load that buffalo gun to help us. If we aren't able to handle Whipple, it's no place for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Paladin."

They walked rapidly to the hotel. While Satterthwaite was writing his name, Paladin asked casually, "Miss Ar-mendariz still in the same room?"

The clerk glanced at him. "Yes—but she's—out right now."

Paladin looked toward the stairway. "I'll check," he said.

The clerk said, "Sir, there is a gentleman in her room, and he has asked not to be disturbed."

Paladin smiled. "Nice of you to warn me," he said.

"In fact, sir"—the clerk seemed worried—"there are two gentlemen in her room."

Paladin restrained a smile. "Of course. She's an actress —and the bigger the audience, the better the performance."

He went to the stairway with long strides, but the redhead eame from under a tree in the inner plaza, to intercept him.

He looked at her. "You're gorgeous," he said.

"You are no less handsome," she told him.

He started around her.

"Are you still on the trail of that woman?" she asked coldly.

He paused. "Not necessarily." He looked at her again. "What is *your* name?"

She smiled. "Helen Romaine." She moved a step closer. "It took you a long time to get around to asking."

Paladin thought he heard voices upstairs, and turned to look at Satterthwaite, but the Englishman had disappeared. Paladin glanced up the stairway, then back at Helen Romaine, and said: "I have business up there."

She drew back a step. "Where you're going," she said with concern, "you may not come back."

"It is not an unusual situation," he noted, and went up. He walked down the hall and knocked at the door of the room. The voices stopped abruptly. He knocked again, loudly, and heard a muffled answer.

"Open up," he said.

After a moment, he heard Miss Armendariz' voice. "Who is it?"

"Now!" said Paladin. "Open up, Whipple. I know you're in there."

There was muttered conversation, and finally the door opened. Miss Armendariz, as beautiful as ever but with her black hair somewhat disheveled, stood at one side and watched Paladin fearfully.

Tom Whipple, sitting on the bed, glared at him. "What are you here for?" he asked.

Joe Marsh, hatless, his thin hair giving him an appearance of bewildered determination, had a buffalo rifle in his hands.

"Miss Armendariz," said Paladin, "I want you in front of me, where I can watch you."

She moved slowly, watching him.

Joe Marsh said, "Paladin, I don't need any help."

Paladin said, "I didn't come here to help you. I came to get my thousand dollars."

"What thousand dollars?" asked Joe Marsh.

"Whipple promised me that for bringing back news of your whereabouts."

Marsh frowned. "He did that?"

Paladin said grimly, "He offered me five if the news should be of your death."

Marsh did not understand at first. Then it began to make sense to him, and he turned to Whipple. "Tom, I found out, in Mexico, what your game was. You were not interested in the freedom of the Mexicans."

Whipple watched him speculatively.

"All you wanted," said Marsh, "was to sell rifles at exorbitant prices. You were behind the gun-running all the time."

Whipple still said nothing.

"You are the one who persuaded me to go down there and help them," said Marsh. "I found out all this after I had been there for a while—but I couldn't understand why."

Whipple watched him.

Marsh kept talking, almost as if he did not see the man sitting on the bed. "I wondered why you sent me down there, but I thought you must have a reason. Then on the way home I wondered why, again. Now Paladin says you practically offered to pay him for killing me. Why, Whipple? Why?"

Whipple moved 'uneasily. "I had to have somebody simple enough to believe in that freedom business, so I could cover up the gun-running—and you were it."

"That's only half the truth," said Marsh. His eyes blazed suddenly. "Tom, you wanted my wife!"

Whipple was studying him, and began to shake his head. "She just thought I did, Joe. All women think things like that."

Joe shouted, "You asked her to marry you!"

Whipple did not move, and Paladin could not understand it unless Whipple had a gun hidden in the bedcloth-ing.

Miss Armendariz uttered a choked scream, and glared at Whipple. "You—you—"

"Stay back!" Paladin commanded.

She turned to look at him, and stopped.

Joe Marsh said, "Tom Whipple, I'm taking you to the United States marshal. You will have to stand trial—and I am going to tell everything I know. You will end up in prison, where you belong."

Whipple brought one hand up from the bed, and in it was a six-shooter. It crashed, and its muzzle blazed with red fire.

Paladin's .44 was in his hand, but Joe Marsh did not need any help. He had the big buffalo rifle at his waist, and pulled the trigger. The black powder thundered, and Whipple fell back from the blow of the bullet. His gun-hand was dropping. He tried to bring it up, but fired it into the floor. There was a small red spot on his shirt, but the heavy bullet had gone clear through, and behind him, the white sheets were flecked with blood. The glaze was coming over his eyes already, and finally he went limp and collapsed, and fell off the bed.

Paladin put his six-shooter in his pocket and turned to the woman. Her face was ashen, and he said coldly: "It appears that you will have to wait."

He took Joe Marsh by the arm. "Where did he hit you?" he asked.

Marsh said, "Under the ribs. Not serious."

Paladin led him out of the room. "We'll call the doc."

"I can walk," said Marsh.

"For a while, yes—but all of a sudden you're going to give way. Let's get downstairs before it hits you."

Marsh looked at him. "All right, Paladin," he said.

They went slowly downstairs, and a cry came from the door: "Joe!"

Mrs. Marsh ran across the floor, awkwardly carrying the muzzle-loader. Paladin smiled tightly and said, "Joe has already taken care of things, Mrs. Marsh."

Joe looked at her and started tq smile. "It's—" he began, and then his head began to drop, and he fainted as Paladin caught him. "He was shot," Paladin told Mrs. Marsh.

She turned white, then stared at Joe for an instant, then began to struggle with his coat.

Paladin laid Joe on the floor and stood back for a moment. He watched her working at him, and knew there was no question of her feelings toward Joe. "I have sent for the doctor," he said softly.

She looked up, abruptly grateful, and Paladin went to the desk. Helen Romaine was waiting, and he smiled at her, and moved toward the desk. "Satterthwaite!" he called. "Reginald Satterthwaite!"

There was no answer. Helen Romaine stood in the center of the floor,

looking puzzled. The clerk said, "Mr. Satterthwaite is in the patio, sir."

"Thanks," said Paladin. "You'd better send somebody upstairs with a mop."

It seemed commonplace to the clerk. "I have already taken care of that," he said.

Paladin turned to Helen Romaine, and was met with a dazzling smile. "Your wait will be well rewarded," he said. "Give me a moment."

He found Satterthwaite behind a cottonwood tree, nursing a drink. "I have a woman for you to meet," Paladin said. "Come on."

Satterthwaite looked up, pleading for him to understand. "Paladin, old boy, I—well, to tell the truth, I— Paladin, I'm scared of women!"

Paladin looked at the redhead from where he stood, and said, "I can think of no reason on earth why you should be afraid of *her."*

Satterthwaite begged, "Let me finish my drink first."

Paladin saw Doctor Lawrence walk across the floor with his black bag. He looked again at Satterthwaite and quoted: " 'Cowards die many times before their deaths...' "

HAVE GUN

WILL TRAVEL



The Place: Santa Fe in the 1870's —hotbed of intrigue and violence.

The Job: Find Joe Marsh, crusading editor of the SANTA FE CITIZEN.

The Danger: The filibusters — men who organize gangs and guns in the U. S. to invade Mexico for insurrection, adventure, or ambition, and bring death wherever they ride.

The Man: Paladin — ready for trouble, he faces the toughest job he has ever taken on.

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